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edited by Aaron Meskin

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For Peter Lamarque
Inspiration and Aspiration

[T]here has not been a major philosophical thinker . . . who has not had something to say about this subject.
—Arthur Danto

Editor’s Foreword

Peter Kivy passed away in May 2017. At the time of his death, he was just in the process of negotiating a contract for this book with the publisher and was able to offer a brief response to three positive reports from reviewers. A few years earlier, Peter had asked me if I would be willing to serve as his literary executor, and I had agreed, not thinking I would be called on so soon.

I have not done a lot to the manuscript. Peter himself wrote, in his reply to his reviewers, that “on my style, I am afraid, I am a bit stubborn. It is *my* style, and I can do no other.” My intention has been to preserve as much of that style as possible. Perhaps some of Peter’s style depended on choices made at the final editing stage. In fact, I am reasonably confident that this is the case. But I am much more confident that it would be foolish to try to guess what those choices might have been.

To that end, I have been conservative in my editorial interventions. Most of what I have done is to correct minor typographical and grammatical errors and format the manuscript in line with the publisher’s guidelines. In some other cases, I have followed through with changes Peter said he would make in that aforementioned reply to reviewers. Perhaps the most significant of these changes is in chapter 3, where I have replaced the term “factual communication” with “informational communication” to match the terminology in chapter 2. This is in line with Peter’s statement in the reply that “reviewer one is absolutely right that I should make the terminology in chapters two and three consistent. I will see to that in my revisions.” I have cut three chapter subtitles in light of Peter’s suggestion that he would cut the subtitle to chapter 4. (I have noted the full original titles in editorial footnotes.) I changed the German word “echt” to “authentic” throughout because one reviewer suggested Peter relied too heavily on foreign phrases and Peter said he was “perfectly happy” to substitute “authentic” in his revisions. In most other cases, I kept the foreign terms. Finally, I have made a few other minor changes to facilitate

comprehension—these amount to adding a word or two to clarify the referent of a pronoun, dividing a very long sentence, or something similar. And I have done my best to correct minor errors in transcribing quotations where I could. I suspect that there are others I did not catch.

I have aimed to avoid philosophically significant changes. (Again, I note any substantive changes to the text in editorial footnotes.) His response to the reviewers suggests that Peter did intend to make some substantive changes to the manuscript. To be clear, nothing suggests he had rethought any of his central claims in the book or any of the arguments he offers for those claims. He did, however, suggest that he would flesh out and/or clarify various arguments throughout. Unfortunately for us, he did not have a chance to do that. It is not my place to do that for him.

Nor did he have the opportunity to take up one reviewer's challenge to explain why laughter might be more important than injustice. This was an opportunity that Peter, a skilled joke teller and master of wit, was excited by: "Laughter versus injustice! A good point reviewer one makes here. I shall address it in my revisions." I would have liked to see how he dealt with the issue.

Over the course of his career, Peter dealt with many philosophical issues: absolute music, aesthetic concepts, aesthetic emotivism, aesthetic terms, authenticity, the cognitive value of literature, disputes about aesthetic matters, emotional expression in music, Hutcheson's aesthetics, jokes, the modern system of the arts, musical profundity, musical representation, the ontology of music, opera, reading, taste, and the list goes on. This book addresses themes in the philosophy of literature, a central interest of his during the last two decades of his long career. With characteristic modesty, Peter suggested that the essays herein are "each the beginning of an investigation of a problem in philosophy of literature." They are fine beginnings indeed.

And there may still be other beginnings to come. Peter's papers include unpublished work on the possibility of a digital Wagner, Haydn, the Hollywood musical, formalism, the sublime, and various other topics. I am hopeful that some of this work will eventually be published.

Frankie Mace, Sarah Campbell, and Rebecca Anastasi from Rowman & Littlefield International were efficient, helpful, and patient. Peter's

widow, Joan Pearlman, as well as his stepdaughter, Karen Pearlman, both provided tremendous help and assistance along the way, and it was Joan who, along with Karen and Peter's other stepdaughters, Chee and Marnae, suggested the excellent image for the cover. Ted Gracyk provided useful advice. Thanks to all of them.

I owe my deepest gratitude to Peter himself, who, as a teacher, mentor, and scholar, shaped my academic and intellectual life in a profound way.

Preface

In the past few years, my philosophical thoughts on the arts have tended to come as single spies rather than in battalions. Hence, I have found the essay form more congenial, and these essays have accumulated, so to speak, in two separate piles: one of musical thoughts, the other literary. It is the latter essays I offer now, all of which are published here for the first time. Their history is as follows.

The idea for the first chapter of this volume, like others herein, came from the classroom. I have been teaching Aristotle's *Poetics*, to undergraduates, for more years than I want to remember and have read chapter 9 over and again, never perceiving until very recently its complexity and apparent contradictions. It is that complexity and those apparent contradictions that I have tried to unravel in chapter 1 of this volume. I am most grateful to Nickolas Pappas for carefully reading and commenting on a draft of the essay. His comments have been extremely enlightening and at times in opposition to my arguments and interpretations. I have, however, left things mostly unchanged. And if there are errors in it, I, and certainly not Professor Pappas, am responsible for them.

Chapter 2 of the collection emerged from my rereading, for a class in philosophy of literature, of Noël Carroll's intriguing essay on art interpretation, in which he happily likened our interaction with the artist to a kind of conversation. I later had the opportunity of presenting it to Professor Carroll's and Professor Stephen Neale's seminar on philosophy of art at the City University of New York Graduate Center.

Chapter 3 is the result of a chance conversation with one of my friends about a detective novel he happened to be reading at the time. What he took for granted, that one of the legitimate pleasures of novel-reading is its providing information and knowledge, seems to me so sensible that it all of a sudden seemed to me as well a profound paradox that so many philosophers of art deny it. I was inspired then and there to defend the sensible against the philosophers in this essay.

In chapter 4, I continue the theme of the previous chapter, namely, that the novel is a legitimate source of knowledge and the pleasure we take in gaining knowledge from our reading of novels a legitimate pleasure in novel-reading.

But in chapter 5, I begin to back off from the claim that novels are a legitimate source of knowledge, not by denying the claim but by emphasizing that it is far from the major reason we read novels, which, I argue, is interest in being told a story.

And in chapter 6, I reemphasize the theme of chapter 5 and dare to offer an explanation of why the pleasure in being told a story lies so deeply in human nature. The explanation is an evolutionary one, with all the danger that such amateur "evolutionizing" carries.

Chapter 7 offers a defense of the thesis I argued for in my book *The Performance of Reading*, that the silent reading of a novel is a kind of performance, against objections that have been raised against it in the literature.

And, in chapter 8, the final chapter, I have tried to end in the spirit of that old vaudevillian admonition: "Always leave 'em laughing." Its inspiration comes from teaching the late Ted Cohen's wonderful little book on the philosophy of jokes in my advanced undergraduate course in aesthetics and philosophy of art. And perhaps my readers may find construing jokes as a form of literature a bit of a stretch. Well, I won't quibble over the matter except to say that if they are not literature, what *are* they? That they are not great literature, nor in written form, I freely grant. But neither fact itself precludes the appellation. And sore diminished would we be without them.

Chapters 2 to 7 form a loosely connected argument and can be read as such. But each essay in the present collection is a self-contained entity and does not require for its comprehension the reading of any of the others.

Chapter 1

The Actual, the Possible, and the Probable

As is well known to all philosophers of art, Plato delivered a withering critique of tragic poetry in Books II, III, and X of the *Republic*.[1] It was a three-pronged attack, arguing that tragic poetry was at fault for arousing the emotions, particularly pity and fear, in the citizenry, appealing to the irrational part of the soul in so doing, as well as in its office as a *mimetic* activity, and, perhaps most damning of all, being incapable of providing genuine knowledge, even though generally thought to do so.

One reading of the *Poetics* has it that Aristotle was, in part, answering at least two prongs of the Platonic attack on tragic poetry. In his much discussed concept of catharsis, as this reading of the *Poetics*, a very controversial and contested one, I must warn, has it, Aristotle was, of course, agreeing with Plato that tragedy arouses pity and fear. But he was arguing, contra Plato, that this was a *beneficial* result since the emotions were discharged harmlessly in the theater and, therefore, having been gotten rid of there, not discharged harmfully on the field of battle. And in his claim that the tragic poet deals with the possible rather than the actual, hence tragedy more philosophical than history, this reading has it that Aristotle was responding to Plato's claim that tragic poetry cannot be a source of genuine knowledge.

In the present chapter it is the second of Aristotle's alleged responses to Plato, what I call Plato's *epistemic* critique of poetry, that I shall be concentrating on. And my thesis is twofold: that there are apparent problems, some amounting to contradictions, in Aristotle's response to Plato's epistemic critique, in Chapter IX of the *Poetics*, not, so far as I know, noticed or commented upon, and that these apparent problems and contradictions are, indeed, apparent only, thus susceptible of resolution.

My plan in the chapter is as follows. I shall, first, outline that aspect of Plato's epistemic critique relevant to my concerns. I shall then outline Aristotle's response to Plato's critique in Chapter IX, as well as the

apparent problems and contradictions therein. And, finally, I shall attempt to resolve what I take to be these *apparent* problems and contradictions.

Plato's Problem

Obviously it would have been pointless for Plato to argue that poetry is not a source of knowledge were it not for the fact that it was the opinion of many in his day, as in ours, that indeed it *is*. As Socrates laments, in *Republic* X, many believe "that good poets do really know the subjects about which they seem to the multitude to speak well."[2]

Plato characterized the poets, of course, as practitioners of mimesis, and the objects of poetic mimesis were the *appearances* of things: how they appear from a certain point of view. But the "things" of the world are, as Plato saw it of course, themselves mimetic, so to say, of the forms, of the essences of things, which they instantiate. "Then must we not conclude," Socrates asks, rhetorically, "that all writers of poetry, beginning with Homer, copy unsubstantial images of every subject about which they write, including virtue, and do not grasp the truth?"[3] And that because, as Plato famously has Socrates aver earlier in Book X, "Hence, since the tragedian is an imitator, we may predicate of him likewise, that he, along with all the other imitators, is the third in descent from the sovereign [i.e., the forms, the essences of things] and from truth."[4]

In other words, Plato's deepest, most powerful *epistemic* indictment of the tragic poets is that they can give no knowledge because they can give no knowledge of the forms, which is to say, the essential natures of things. And *that*, after all, on Plato's view, is what *knowledge*, properly so called, really amounts to. Although Plato has other, what might correctly be called *epistemic*, indictments of the poets and other mimetic practitioners, in the *Republic*, I shall refer to the above as *the* epistemic indictment of the tragic poets in the dialogue. For it is the deepest and most philosophically interesting. And it is this epistemic indictment of Plato's that I, and others, read Aristotle as responding to in *Poetics* IX. To that response I now turn.

Aristotle's Answer

To cut to the chase, Aristotle writes, in the well-known distinction in the *Poetics*, Chapter IX, between poetry and history: "A poet differs from a historian, not because one writes verse and the other prose . . . but because the historian relates what happened, the poet what might happen."[5] Or, in other words, "it is not the poet's business to relate actual events, but such things as might happen in accordance with probability or necessity."[6] And, furthermore, "That is why poetry is more akin to philosophy and is a better thing than history; poetry deals with general truths, history with specific events."[7]

Now I take it that this is a response to Plato's epistemic indictment of the tragic poet in that Aristotle is taking the ideas, or forms, or universals, as "possibilities," which, of course, may or may not be instantiated at any given time, may be, or may not ever be instantiated, but could possibly be instantiated, which is to say, there is no universal that cannot possibly be instantiated. And I will not take a stand here as to whether it is logical possibility or merely empirical possibility that is at stake. It will not affect my arguments one way or the other.

Given, then, that Aristotle is taking Platonic universals to be possibilities of instantiation, his answer to Plato's epistemic indictment of the tragic poets, namely, that they are thrice removed from knowledge of the universals, is that, to the contrary, the tragic poets, in that they deal with possibilities, with what *could* happen rather than what has happened, *are* in fact dealing with universals, with the possibilities of things. They are not thrice removed from Platonic reality. Platonic reality, the possibilities of things, is exactly what they are revealing to us in their plots. What "happened" to Oedipus, what "happened" to Orestes and Iphigenia, never *really* happened. What the plots tell us is that such weirdly improbable things *could* happen. In showing us this, Aristotle is saying, we are learning about Platonic universals: about possibilities, in other words, about the nature of things. And that is why, Plato to the contrary notwithstanding, the tragic poets are akin to the philosophers and sources of true genuine knowledge in the Platonic sense: knowledge of reality. But the question

now naturally arises: How are the tragic poets to convince their audiences that what they present *are* indeed *possibilities*? And the answer Aristotle proffers leads directly to the apparent problems and contradictions in Chapter IX of the *Poetics* of which I spoke in my introduction.

ARISTOTLE'S PROBLEMS

(a) Following hard by his assertion that the historians tell us what has happened, the tragic poets not what has happened but what may possibly happen, Aristotle, in Chapter IX, gives us the following explanation of why "The tragedians cling to the names of *historical* persons. The reason is," he explains, "that what is possible is convincing and we are apt to distrust what has not yet happened, whereas what *has* happened is obviously possible else it could not have happened."[8]

But surely there at least seems to be a blatant contradiction here. At the outset of Chapter IX, Aristotle has told us that what distinguishes the tragic poet from the historian is that the historian relates what has happened, the tragic poet what has not happened, not actual events but what might possibly happen, which is to say, possible events. He is now telling us that the best way for the tragic poet to convince his audience the events he is portraying are possible events, the way, indeed, the great tragedians have done so, is to portray what has actually happened to characters with names familiar to his audiences, for actuality *implies* possibility: what has happened is obviously possible, else it could not have happened. So, as Chapter IX progresses, the tragic poet has turned out to be a historian after all. They both relate the actual, for all of Aristotle's talk of the possible at the outset of the chapter. And there are more problems to come.

(b) There is no doubt that Aristotle was aware of some kind of disconnect between these two assertions in Chapter IX. For, to begin with, he spends some time discussing made-up characters and plots. Of these, he says, "indeed a few tragedies have no well-known names at all, the *Antheus* of Agathon, for example. Both the names and the events of that play are fictitious, yet it is enjoyable nevertheless."[9] But this leaves us again with the question of how the tragedian convinces his audiences

of his plot's possibility. And Aristotle's earlier answer is clearly not applicable here since his answer is that actuality proves possibility, and plots such as Agathon's are not actual but made up.

Aristotle then seems to back off further from the beginning of Chapter IX by averring, "It is not, therefore, absolutely necessary to cling to the traditional stories which are the normal subjects of tragedy. In fact, it is absurd to do so, for even the familiar stories are familiar only to a few, yet are enjoyed by all."[10]

What we seem to have here is almost a complete about-face. At first Aristotle tells us that the tragic poets cling to the familiar names and stories because real happenings must be possible happenings, and they are concerned with the possible, the assumption of course being that the familiar things that happened to these familiar characters were real happenings and real characters, familiar to the tragic poets' audiences; and since the audiences believed these were real characters and real happenings, they also would be convinced they were possible characters and possible happenings, as the actual implies the possible. But now, close to the end of Chapter IX, Aristotle is telling us that there is no need to cling to the familiar characters and familiar happenings because they are not familiar to most of the tragedians' audiences. So we seem to be involved in yet another contradiction and, again, at a loss to know how the playwrights are to convince their audiences that they are dealing with the possible.

(c) Furthermore, the conclusion of Chapter IX adds still another puzzle. For Aristotle ends by writing that the tragic poet "is no less a poet if he happens to tell a true story, for nothing prevents some actual events from being probable or possible, and it is this probability or possibility that makes the [tragic] poet."[11]

But what, then, distinguishes the tragic poet from the historian in this case, the case where the tragic poet happens to tell a true story? At the outset of Chapter IX, Aristotle said that the difference was between someone who relates what *can* happen, the *possible*, and someone who relates what *has* happened, the *actual*. Now, however, we are being told by Aristotle, at the close of Chapter IX, that the tragic poet can relate what *has* happened, the *actual*, and still remain a tragic poet, not a

historian, because being actual, what *has* happened, does not prevent an event's being probable or possible, and it is this probability or possibility that makes the tragic poet.

(d) What must be noticed straightaway is that the "probable" has been added to the "possible" as a subject for the tragic poet. Furthermore, Aristotle has stated the relation between the actual, and the possible and probable, in a very odd way; to wit, nothing prevents some actual events from being probable or possible. This is not just odd; it is weird. For it seems to suggest not only that some actual events are improbable, which is quite right, but that some actual events are impossible, which not only contradicts Aristotle's previously stated precept that the actual proves the possible; as well, it is, on the face of it, totally off the wall. How could the actual *not* be possible?

(e) And now, going back to Aristotle's injection of the "probable" into the equation to add to the "possible" as the tragic poet's subject matter, which he actually had already done at the beginning of Chapter IX, there certainly appears to be a violent disconnect here with the traditional plots of the extant tragedies. For it would seem that in large part they deal with the highly, indeed the monstrously, *improbable*. Not only that, it would further seem that the tragedians' exploring of the possible, which, according to Aristotle, is their defining essence, would hardly make sense if the *improbably* possible were not their subject. To ponder the possibility of the highly improbable events of the *Oedipus Rex* or the *Iphigenia in Taurus* seems to be what makes sense of the claim that the subject of the tragic poets is what *could* happen, not what has happened. That such *improbable* events could happen is a discovery. But what probably will happen one already knows since it has, no doubt, already happened in one's own experience.

Finally, to add to the puzzles of Chapter IX is Aristotle's statement that the tragic poet is no less a poet if he happens to tell a true story. If Aristotle is thinking here of a tragic poet who "happens to tell a true story" as a poet who happens, *intentionally*, to tell a true story, and nevertheless, in so doing, is still a tragic poet, then, again, contradiction looms since it would seem that to intentionally tell a true story is to be a historian, not a tragic poet, according to Aristotle's initial distinction between the tragic poet and the historian.

If, on the other hand, Aristotle means by a tragic poet who "happens to tell a true story" one who makes up a story that, unbeknownst to him, unintended by him, turns out to be, point for point, word for word, an account of actual events, one is immersed in a logical and metaphysical quagmire and does not quite know *what* to say.

A liar can, of course, unintentionally tell the truth. If I tell someone that John is in Milwaukee, when I firmly believe he is in Philadelphia, for purposes of deception, and it turns out that, unbeknownst to me, John really *is* in Milwaukee, then I have accidently, unintentionally told the truth. But fictional narratives are not lies. And it is not at all clear *what* it would mean, or Aristotle *could* have meant, to say that a fictional narrative turned out, accidentally, unintentionally, unbeknownst to the author, to be *true*.

Even given the extreme philosophical thought experiment of a fictional narrative, the text of which turns out to be word for word identical to the text of a true historical narrative, it would be, I think, a false description of the fictional narrative text to characterize it as, in the event, *turning out to be true*. And the reason is that all of the objects and characters and events referred to in the fictional text are different objects and characters and events, being *fictional* objects and characters and events, from those referred to in the historical text. Word-for-word correspondence between the texts cannot *make* the fictional narrative true of what the historical text is *about* because the fictional text is *not* about what the true historical text is about.

Chapter IX of the *Poetics* is, then, rich in philosophical content but presents numerous problems, amounting at times to apparent out-and-out contradictions, in that content. And what I now propose to do is to examine the text more closely to see whether these problems and apparent contradictions can be resolved.

SOLVING AND RESOLVING

My plan in what follows will be to go through the problems and possible contradictions I have cited above, seriatim, (a) through (e), and try to resolve them into some kind of coherent whole.

(a) The initial and perhaps most glaring problem, indeed apparent contradiction, in *Poetics* IX is generated by Aristotle's thesis that what distinguishes the tragic poet from the historian is that the latter relates what has in fact happened, the former what might possibly happen, combined with his suggestion as to how the tragic poets try to convince their audiences that what they relate *is* indeed possible. For the suggestion, it will be recalled, is that the tragic poets cling to the names of historical persons because people tend to believe that what has not happened perhaps cannot happen, is impossible, whereas what has happened obviously is possible or it could not in fact have happened. The problem, or contradiction, if you like, as we have seen, is of course that in one breath Aristotle is telling us the tragic poet relates what can happen, the possible, not what has happened, the actual, and in the next breath tells us that in order to assure his audience what he is relating *is* what can happen, what *is* possible, he relates what *has* happened since what has happened proves its possibility.

Here, as in my discussion to follow of the other problems, my first gambit will be to compare translations (as I have no Greek myself). I have used throughout my exposition of Aristotle G. M. A. Grube's more recent translation of 1958. But I have at my disposal as well, and will refer to when appropriate, the translations of Thomas Twining (1789), S. H. Butcher (1894), and W. Hamilton Fyfe (1927).

In the present case, however, a comparison of translations does not help. They all more or less agree in the crucial respects. But it is of some considerable interest that Twining, early on, was troubled by Aristotle's appeal to the actual as proof of the possible, in the passage under discussion. For he wrote in a footnote to the passage, "The philosopher might safely have trusted to any reader to find this *proof* of the *possibility* of what *has* actually happened.—A modern writer would certainly have omitted this; and I wish Aristotle had."[12]

What is the root of Twining's dissatisfaction with Aristotle's "proof" of possibility? For starters, it appears as if Twining found the proof otiose: so obvious as to be unnecessary; it might safely have been trusted to any reader to find it. Is that the only reason he wished that Aristotle had omitted it? Had he also noticed, as I have, the apparent

contradiction? If so, he left it unremarked upon. But the question remains: Is the contradiction real or merely apparent? Let me try to make out a case for the latter alternative.

I begin with what I take to be a reasonable assumption. I find it impossible to credit Aristotle with actually believing the traditional stories and myths that were the stock-in-trade of the tragic poets to be historical fact. But if that is so, what could he have meant in claiming that the use of these stories by the tragic poets was a case of using the actual to prove the possible?

Here is my conjecture. I think what Aristotle was really saying is that the *believable* is a kind of proof of the possible. That his ancestors and the ancestors of the audiences of his time had taken these stories to be historical fact, even though he and his more enlightened fellow citizens no longer did, made them at least *seem* possible to them. And perhaps we can make the claim even stronger if what is involved here is not merely empirical but logical possibility. In that case the claim would then be that believability proves logical possibility, if not empirical possibility.

My conjecture is given at least some support in Aristotle's remark a bit later on in Chapter IX that "the familiar stories are familiar only to a few, yet are enjoyed by all."[13] In other words, that the traditional stories were no longer familiar to Aristotle's fellow citizens suggests that they were no longer a part of their belief systems and would not be taken for historical truth when encountered in dramatic performances. They were believable since they were once, but no longer, believed; and their believability was what suggested, if did not prove, their possibility.

Seen in this way, then, what seemed a contradiction is a seeming contradiction only. Historians deal in true beliefs about what has happened. The tragic poets deal in what has been believed, no longer is believed, has been possible to believe, and, with a weak "therefore," is *possible*.

(b) My second problem with Chapter IX was with Aristotle's claim, which seemed a complete about-face, that the tragic poets did not have to stick to the traditional stories but could make up stories of their own, as Agathon had done in his *Antheus*. The problem is that Aristotle had already claimed that the tragic poets deal with the possible, not the

actual, with what can happen, not with what has happened, and they use the traditional stories because they are what has happened, and so must be what *can* happen, since actuality proves possibility, thus convincing their audiences that they are indeed dealing with the possible. But if, like Agathon, the tragic poet makes up his own story, how can he prove to his audience that he is dealing with the possible, with what can happen, since he is dealing with the made up, with what hasn't happened, and cannot, therefore, prove possibility through actuality?

But this problem quickly dissolves if one accepts my solution to the first problem. For if what Aristotle was really saying at the beginning of Chapter IX, first appearances to the contrary notwithstanding, was that it is the believable, not the actual, that proves the possible, then all the tragic poet need to do to prove that he is dealing with the possible, with what could happen, if he makes up his own story, is to be sure to make up a *believable* story, in the sense of "believable" I described above, in resolving problem (a). And that is all that need be said in solving problem (b). On then to (c).

(c) The third problem raised by Chapter IX of the *Poetics*, as I read it, is with Aristotle's assertion that "it is this probability or possibility that makes the tragic poet."[14] Possibility was the defining subject of the tragic poet's art right from the get-go. But how *probability*?

If it is the main task of the tragic poet to explore possibilities, then it would seem pointless, as I said previously, for him to relate stories that contain probable happenings because we all *know* these things can happen and frequently have, even in our own experience. What I assume Aristotle had in mind is that the tragic poet relates wildly *improbable* events, like those of the *Oedipus Rex* or the *Iphigenia in Taurus*, that we never would have thought possible until the tragic poet presents them to us. And this assumption was also made, interestingly enough, by Twining, in his 1789 translation, where, in a footnote to the text under consideration, he tells us that Aristotle was thinking, clearly, "of *extraordinary* events, such as [tragic] *Poetry* requires."[15] If it isn't extraordinary, if it isn't improbable, it isn't *news*.

One way out of this dilemma is to make a distinction between what I shall call *internal* probability as opposed to *external* probability.

The set of events that makes up the *Oedipus Rex* or the *Iphigenia in Taurus* is a highly improbable set of events, highly unlikely to occur. I call that *external* probability; and I suggest that it is *that* probability that we have a right to assume should be a very *low* probability, in other words, an *improbability* in the tragic poet's plots.

But once the tragic poet chooses his story and sets up the initial, improbable conditions, then the events should unfold in a reasonable way, given those improbable conditions. In other words, the plot should be what I call *internally* probable: it should portray, as Aristotle put it, "the kind of thing a certain type of person would [in a given situation] probably or inevitably do or say."[16] It is what I am calling *internal* probability that, I suggest, Aristotle had in mind when he averred that the tragic poet deals in possibility *and* probability. Thus, it is perfectly consistent to say that, according to Aristotle, the tragic poet deals in probability and improbability. The probability is *internal* probability, the improbability *external* probability, which is to say, the improbably possible. The dilemma is resolved.

(d) The problem that confronts us next is the weird result of Aristotle's assertion that "nothing prevents some actual events from being probable or possible."[17] For what the assertion implies is that some actual events are not possible, which not only contradicts the Aristotelian precept that actuality proves possibility but is, on the face of it, absurdly false: indeed, a palpable contradiction.

Here, however, we may well have a case of *traduttori*, *traditori*. For if we go from the Grube translation, from which I have just quoted, to W. Hamilton Fyfe's rendition of the same passage, we get the far more reasonable "for there is nothing to prevent some actual occurrences being of the sort of thing that would probably or inevitably happen."[18]

Reading the passage with Fyfe, it becomes quite intelligible. The claim, on this reading, is simply that an actual occurrence might be one of a *kind* of occurrences, some instances of which might be probable, some inevitable, and, of course, all being actual, also being possible.

(e) Finally, we must confront Aristotle's puzzling claim that the tragic poet "is no less a poet if he happens to tell a true story."[19]

The claim is doubly puzzling. To begin with, as we have seen, the passage seems to be posing the example of a poet who makes up a story that, accidentally, unbeknownst to him, turns out to be true, which is a hard case to make sense of logically or ontologically. And, second, the example seems to contradict Aristotle's initial and defining precept that the tragic poet deals with the possible, what can happen, and the *historian* solely with the actual, what *has* happened. For if the tragic poet's story turns out to be true and he still remains a tragic poet, then he is doing the historian's work, contrary to Aristotle's definition of the tragic poet and his subject.

Yet again, though, we can be helped out of our seeming difficulties by appeal to another translator, this time the venerable Butcher, who has the offending passage, "And even if he chooses to take an historical subject, he is none the less a poet; for there is no reason why some events that have actually happened should not conform to the law of the probable and possible, and in virtue of that quality in them he is their [tragic] poet or maker."[20]

What first strikes us in Butcher's reading of the troublesome passage is that it removes any suggestion of accident. The tragic poet does not, in Butcher's translation, accidentally tell the truth in a fictional work (whatever that would mean). He *chooses* a historical happening for his plot. So the logical and metaphysical problem of an accidentally true fiction need bother us no further.

However, the apparent contradiction remains. How can an author choose a historical subject and remain a tragic poet since Aristotle has already stated at the outset of Chapter IX that an essential difference between the tragic poet and the historian is that the historian's (chosen) subject is what has happened, the tragic poet's what could possibly happen? But help out of this dilemma is on the way if we return to Grube's text: not, indeed, to his translation but rather to a pertinent and insightful footnote. With regard to Aristotle's distinction at the outset of Chapter IX, between the tragic poet and the historian, Grube sagely

remarks, “Aristotle fails to make any distinction between history and chronicle.”[21]

That I think is precisely the right point here. When Aristotle contrasts the historian with the tragic poet, at the outset of Chapter IX, what he seems to mean by “historian” is exactly what *we* would mean by “chronicler,” which is to say, someone who simply records what has happened, offering no conjectures as to *why* it happened, whether it was inevitable that it happened, improbable that it happened, extraordinary that it happened, and so on.

When, however, toward the close of Chapter IX, Aristotle tells us that the tragic poet can choose a historical subject, what really happened, for the subject of his plot, and still remain a tragic poet, he adds that the author remains a tragic poet just because he does with the subject just what the “historian,” for which read “chronicler,” does *not* do. He considers “the probable and the possible” of the historical events he has chosen for his plot, “and it is this probability or possibility that makes the tragic poet.”[22]

The difference between the historian and the tragic poet, then, according to Aristotle, is not that the one deals with what happened, the other with what could possibly happen, *simpliciter*, *sans phrase*. The difference is that the former deals *just* with what has happened, whereas the latter can, if he chooses, deal with what has happened, but *not* just with what has happened. He must deal with the why and wherefore of what has happened: with its modality and its cause. Thus, there is no contradiction here with what was said at the opening of Chapter IX, just so long as we keep in mind that when Aristotle spoke of history, he was speaking of chronicle.

We may certainly disagree with what Aristotle thought history was, even the history of his own day. Certainly Grube was expressing such disagreement in no uncertain terms when he wrote, somewhat impatiently, of the opening of Chapter IX, “This brief reference to history is very unsatisfactory and surprising from one who knew the works of both Herodotus and Thucydides.”[23]

But that is another matter. The matter at hand is whether Aristotle, given *his* concept of “history,” as stated in the *Poetics*, contradicted

himself when he contrasted the tragic poet with the historian at the outset of Chapter IX and then averred at the close that the tragic poet could choose a historical subject and still remain a tragic poet. And, so I have argued, given *his* concept of history, the opening of *Poetics* IX and its close are, on this matter, perfectly consistent with one another.

CONCLUSION

Poetics IX is philosophically rich and, it seems to me, crucial to the entire work—at least to that part of it that has survived. I have here homed in on five apparent problems or contradictions therein and attempted to solve or dissolve them. It would be otiose to try to go over the problems and contradictions yet again in my conclusion.

The question, however, now remains as to whether my interpretation of Chapter IX is consistent with the rest of the *Poetics* as we have it. But that question must await another occasion.

So I will simply conclude with a thought that I am sure has oft been thought before and the present encounter with the *Poetics* has once again affirmed: that Aristotle's *Poetics* is the richest and most intelligent text in the history of art and its philosophy, from Plato to the present.

NOTES

1. Editor's note: The original title of the chapter included the subtitle "Problems in *Poetics* IX."
2. Plato, *The Republic of Plato*, trans. John Llewelyn Davies and David James Vaughan (London: Macmillan, 1950), 340 (599).
3. Ibid., 343 (600).
4. Ibid., 339 (597).
5. Aristotle, *The Poetics*, trans. and ed. G. M. A. Grube, *Aristotle on Poetry and Style* (Indianapolis: Bobbs-Merrill, 1958), 18.
6. Ibid.
7. Ibid.
8. Ibid., 18–19, emphasis added.
9. Ibid., 19.
10. Ibid.

11. Ibid.
12. Aristotle, *Treatise on Poetry*, trans. Thomas Twining (London, 1789), 82n.
13. Aristotle, *The Poetics*, 19.
14. Ibid.
15. Aristotle, *Treatise on Poetry*, 83n.
16. Aristotle, *The Poetics*, 18.
17. Ibid., 19.
18. Aristotle, *The Poetics*, trans. W. Hamilton Fyfe, in Aristotle, *The Poetics*, "Longinus," *On the Sublime*, Demetrius, *On Style* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press; London: William Heinemann, 1953), 37.
19. Aristotle, *The Poetics*, 19.
20. Aristotle, *The Poetics*, trans. S. H. Butcher, in *Aristotle's Theory of Poetry and Fine Art*, 4th ed., ed. John Gassner (New York: Dover, 1951), 37.
21. Aristotle, *The Poetics*, 18n.
22. Ibid., 19.
23. Ibid., 18n.

Chapter 2

Criticism, Communication, Conversation, Craft

In an essay that has become something of a classic in the literature, Noël Carroll expressed the happy thought that "When we read a literary text or contemplate a painting, we enter a relationship with its creator that is roughly analogous to a conversation."[1] I have not come to bury this thesis but to praise it and to add to it some reflections of my own as friendly amendments. The first order of business, of course, is to put before you the thesis in more detail and in the context in which it was first presented. To that task I now turn my attention.

CONVERSATION AND INTENTION

What I shall call the *conversation thesis* is brought forward by Carroll to counter what he calls the *anti-intentionalist* in criticism. And our first job is to get a handle on the anti-intentionalist.

There are, actually, on Carroll's view, two brands of anti-intentionalism in criticism. "The first relies on adducing ontological reasons based on the nature of artworks to deny the relevance of authorial intention to interpretation. The second argues for the irrelevance of intention by exploring the aesthetic interests that audiences have in art."[2] It is the second brand of anti-intentionalism that I will be exclusively concerned with here, although I concur completely with Carroll's very convincing refutation of the first. And for convenience, since it is only the second brand of anti-intentionalism that I will be discussing, I will refer to *it* throughout as anti-intentionalism *simpliciter* and its proponent simply as the anti-intentionalist.

According to the anti-intentionalist, as Carroll presents him, "an artistic object has a purpose: affording aesthetic satisfaction."[3] And in saying that an artistic object has *a* purpose, the production of aesthetic satisfaction, we have a right to infer, as Carroll indeed does, that it is being claimed to be the artistic object's *sole* purpose, *qua* artwork.

It then follows from this assumption, according to the anti-intentionalist, that, as Carroll puts it, “since the point of consuming art, and of interpretation as an adjunct to artistic consumption, is to maximize aesthetic satisfaction, we should always favor those interpretations that afford the best aesthetic experience that is compatible with established textual meaning conventions.”[4] But then, clearly, the conclusion forces itself upon us that “since aesthetic richness is our overriding concern, we need only interpret with an eye to that which is most aesthetically satisfying and linguistically plausible.”[5] And so the anti-intentionalist now has his sought-for thesis: “Whether or not the meanings we attribute to a text were authorially intended is irrelevant.”[6] In short, “Thus for aesthetic purposes, we may always forgo concern for authorial intent in favor of the best aesthetic interpretation.”[7]

Carroll’s response to the anti-intentionalist is, first, simply to deny his underlying premise, namely, that the sole purpose of art—and our interaction with it—is to provide aesthetic satisfaction. He writes, “in dealing with artworks we have more interests than aesthetic interests—as ‘aesthetic interests’ are usually construed within the philosophical tradition—and that there is no reason to think that these interests are always trumped by aesthetic ones.”[8]

But what are these “other interests,” besides the aesthetic, that we take in artworks? “Broadly speaking,” Carroll writes, “I would call them ‘conversational.’ When we read a literary text or contemplate a painting,” he explains, “we enter a relationship with its creator that is roughly analogous to a conversation.”[9] This, then, is the *conversation thesis* in its setting as a response to the anti-intentionalist. In what way, though, *is* it a *response*?

At this point, quite rightly, Carroll resorts to a more or less Gricean account of *meaning* that has as one necessary condition on the meaning of an utterance or text the intention of the utterer or author to convey a certain meaning through the utterance or text. The second meaning condition, since any intender can, of course, fail in his intention, is that the vehicle of communication, whether utterance or text, that the intender chooses has some palpable likelihood of actually conveying to

its intended recipient the intended meaning, thus ruling out the claim of Humpty Dumpty that "There's glory for you" means what he *intended* it to mean, namely, "There's a knock down argument for you." But for our purposes here, the second condition on meaning will not concern us. It is the first, of course, the intention condition, that will.

Of the intention condition on meaning, Carroll writes, with reference to the *conversation thesis*, "A fulfilling conversation requires that we have the conviction of having grasped what our interlocutor *meant* or *intended* to say."[10] Thus, among other things, we "seek out artworks in order to converse or commune with their makers."[11] And again, "art is obviously in part a matter of communication and . . . we bring to it our ordinary human disposition to understand what another human being is saying to us."[12]

Having, now, Carroll's *conversation thesis* before us as a response, a correct response, in my view, to the anti-intentionalist *as far as it goes*, I want in the next section to expand upon it in two ways. Then in the sections after that, I will argue that the *conversation thesis* still leaves significant artistic features, namely, what I deem the *aesthetic* ones, hostage to the anti-intentionalist. And I will conclude by offering another thesis to rescue the aesthetic features from anti-intentionalism.

CONVERSATION AND COMMUNICATION

Carroll, as I have quoted him above, quite rightly construes art as "in part a matter of communication." The communication, of course, that he has in mind is something analogous to conversation. But what I would first like to do is to distinguish between two kinds of communication that artworks involve: what I shall call *conversational communication*, which is, of course, what Carroll has specifically in mind, and a second, which I shall call *informational communication*. This is not, I should add, a criticism of Carroll's position but rather a friendly amendment.

Moby Dick famously conveys a great deal of information about whales and about whaling as it was practiced in nineteenth-century New England. On my view, all of this information conveyed, even the more recondite details of the whale's biology, is an absolutely essential artistic feature of the novel. Furthermore, I believe that any such information

Melville conveys that might turn out to be *false* would be an *artistic* blemish on the work. And, finally, I think that having such information communicated to me is part of my *artistic* enjoyment and appreciation of the novel.

Many, perhaps most, literary theorists and philosophers of art will violently disagree with me about this, averring, rather, that in deriving this information about whales and whaling from *Moby Dick*, I am using it for other than its novelistic purposes. Nor will I attempt to argue for the view here, except to make the following obvious point.[13] It is generally accepted by critics that the implausibility of a plot is a defect in a fictional narrative. But surely, the implausibility of a plot is an example of the failure of the work to accurately depict reality, which is to say, to accurately present "the facts," as the substance of the criticism is, essentially, "the world just isn't *that way*." And is that not precisely what the defect would be in *Moby Dick* if Melville had got the "facts" of whales and whaling wrong?

As I say, I cannot take time to argue the point at length here. It must be a topic for another occasion. All that I wish to accomplish with this example, which, of course, can be generalized for artworks *tout court*, is that artworks *do* communicate such information, and this is what I call, in contrast to *conversational communication*, *informational communication*. What's the difference?

My point is that *informational communication* does not, nor is it meant to, engage the reader or viewer in what Carroll represents as "conversation" between creator and audience. For, to stick with the example of *Moby Dick*, what would there be to "converse" with the author *about* in regard to the information conveyed about whales and whaling that he communicated? A conversation involves response and counterresponse and, frequently and more importantly, argument and counterargument (as we shall see presently). But what possible back-and-forth conversation or argument could reasonably be initiated by the information Melville conveys? It is simply *received*, and there's an end on it. There is nothing to "converse" about.

Where, it seems to me, *conversational communication* comes into the picture is when the artist conveys to her audience what I called, after

William James, in my book *The Performance of Reading* "live hypotheses." And I must devote some time at this juncture to spelling out this notion. For it constitutes a second "friendly amendment" to Carroll's *conversation thesis*. I appropriated the notions of "live hypothesis" and "dead hypothesis" from William James's famous essay "The Will to Believe."[14] In brief, "A live hypothesis," as I put it in my book, "is one that appears to the person who contemplates it as at least a viable candidate for belief, even though he or she might not presently believe it. A dead hypothesis, on the other hand, is one that has no such appeal at all, but is taken to be not a possible option, that is to say, not possibly true."[15]

One of the purposes of *some* novels, I argued in *The Performance of Reading*, is to communicate to the reader live hypotheses concerning the deep, perennial questions of philosophy and morality and other subjects of human concern. The reader is meant to think about these in what I called the "gaps" and "afterlife" of novel-reading, which is to say, the intervals between reading sessions, since a novel cannot be and is not intended to be read at one go, and the period after a novel has been read, while its memory still lingers on to provoke food for further thought.[16] What I now want to propose is this. Carroll's *conversation thesis* combines perfectly with the thesis in *The Performance of Reading* that the live hypotheses communicated in novels are meant to be thought about in the gaps and afterlife of the reading experience. For what better way of characterizing the thought process taking place in the gaps and afterlife than as an imagined "conversation" between reader and author—between the agent proposing the live hypotheses and the agent to whom they are proposed?

Carroll initially advances the *conversation thesis* with some palpable diffidence. He writes of the conversational relationship of audience to artist as only "*roughly analogous* to a conversation" and cautions that "Obviously, *it is not as interactive* as an ordinary conversation, for we are not receiving *spontaneous feedback* concerning our own responses."[17]

Now, needless to say, I am not about to claim that Carroll is mistaken and that the interaction between author and reader is *literally* conversation. But what I *do* mean to suggest is that it is *more*

conversation-like than Carroll feels able to acknowledge, which, I presume, is a conclusion he would welcome rather than reject. I wrote in *The Performance of Reading*, "Sometimes—indeed frequently—when I think about philosophy, or some other 'serious' matter, it is in the form of an argument or conversation in the head with someone specific."[18] And applied to the novel, "these thoughts in the gaps and afterlife are, at least for me, and, I am surmising, for many other people, experienced as something like Plato's unuttered conversation."[19] For Plato, famously, in the *Sophist*, asked the rhetorical question, "Are not thought and speech the same, with this exception, that what is called thought is the unuttered conversation of the soul with herself?"[20] And to expand on Plato's suggestion, might not my thoughts about the live hypotheses authors convey to me be an unuttered conversation by myself with Elliot or Dickens, as I imagine them to be and to respond to my arguments?

What I am suggesting, then, is that when we, as Carroll says, enter into a "conversation" with the creator of an artwork, we have a silent Platonic conversation in the head, in which we discuss, or argue, with him over the live hypotheses that have been conveyed by the artwork. And although the artist cannot, as Carroll warns, *literally* give us spontaneous feedback, he *does* give us the feedback we imagine he might give, to which we respond, and so on, as long as we find it fruitful to continue the "dialogue." Carroll calls the relation with the artist "roughly analogous to a conversation." I would delete "roughly" and replace it with "closely." And I would add that this silent conversation is, to appropriate Carroll's word, "interactive"—as I might put it, "counterfactually interactive." In other words, "If I were to say this, he might say that; and if I were to say that, he might say," and so on.

I have, then, made two friendly amendments to Carroll's *conversation thesis*. I have added *informational communication* to Carroll's *conversational communication*. And I have tried to spell out more fully how I understand *conversational communication*, in terms of my discussion, in *The Performance of Reading*, of live hypotheses and the gaps and afterlife of the reading experience. But in doing so, I have not departed from Carroll's rejection of the anti-intentionalist, a rejection that I heartily endorse.

But let us now remind ourselves, at this juncture, how Carroll's argument is structured. As Carroll puts it, the anti-intentionalist assumes that the sole purpose of art, *qua* art, is to provide for its audience aesthetic satisfaction. The sole purpose of the critic, therefore, is to provide the interpretation of any given artwork that maximizes its potential for producing aesthetic satisfaction. And if, in so doing, the interpretation attributes to the artwork aesthetic features that the artist did not intend putting there, it makes no matter. The only thing that matters critically is the maximizing of aesthetic satisfaction.

To this, Carroll responds, as we have seen, that the anti-intentionalist is mistaken in assuming aesthetic satisfaction to constitute our sole interest in art. We have another interest (at least): being communicated to through something like a conversation with the artist. And since communication is, of course, the conveying of meaning, the conveying of meaning depending upon knowledge of the communicator's meaning-intentions, the anti-intentionalist has been answered.

However, it is only a partial answer to anti-intentionalism. For if the structure of the argument is as stated, Carroll has, it seems to me, ceded aesthetic features to the anti-intentionalist. As Carroll puts it, "in order to coordinate our aesthetic interests and our conversational interests, the best policy would not appear to be anti-intentionalism but the pursuit of aesthetic satisfaction constrained by our best hypothesis about authorial intent."[21] But it is, it would seem, the "conversational interests" that are "constrained by . . . authorial intention," not "aesthetic satisfaction," if Carroll is to be steady to his text.

Let me begin to spell this out by adducing Carroll's favorite example, Edward Wood's *Plan 9 from Outer Space*, arguably the most celebrated cinematic failure in cinema history. Carroll writes, "Within the context of recent film criticism, it is appropriate to regard disturbances of continuity editing, disorienting narrative ellipses, or disruptions of eyeline matches as subversions of a dominant and *ideologically suspect* form of filmmaking."[22] Such innovative and rebellious techniques,

Carroll continues, “are often commended because they transgress what are called the codes of Hollywood filmmaking, thereby striking this or that blow for emancipation.”[23]

However, such critics, Carroll points out, “began to project these readings backward.” So, “if a narrative incoherence or an editing discontinuity in a film of 1988 counts as a transgression, why not count a similar disturbance in a film of 1959 as equally transgressive?”[24]—even though it could not, in 1959, have been *intentional* but, rather, the result of ineptitude and lack of skill. “Thus a hack film by Edward Wood, *Plan 9 from Outer Space*, is celebrated [by such critics] as transgressive as if it were a postmodernist exercise in collage.”[25]

Now looking at the “transgressions” in *Plan 9* in one perfectly reasonable way, Carroll’s *conversation thesis* is a perfectly adequate response. For, as I would put it, those filmmakers who were intentionally transgressing Hollywood’s filmmaking codes intended, in so doing, to communicate the live hypothesis for our consideration that, as Carroll puts it, Hollywood’s filmmaking codes constitute “a dominant and ideologically suspect form of filmmaking.” Thus, the transgressions were the intended means to the intended end of expressing that live hypothesis. Without the intentions, we do not have *meaning*, that is, the hypothesis or the conversation. But, as Carroll points out, “It would be incredible to attribute to Edward Wood the kinds of beliefs that contemporary avant-garde filmmakers have about the techniques, purposes, and effects of subverting Hollywood films.”[26] So if the film critic should attribute to *Plan 9* the transgressions as so understood—understood, that is, as the expression of a live hypothesis about Hollywood “ideology”—then the *conversation thesis* constitutes a knockdown rebuttal. If the transgressions are not intentional, they cannot be a vehicle for meaning. If there is no meaning, there can be no conversation. But conversation is the point of the exercise. And there cannot be conversation with the creator of *Plan 9* because he had no intention to mean, for without intention to mean, there cannot be meaning.

But that is not the end of Carroll’s concerns. For he then goes on to consider a possible anti-intentionalist argument for the transgressions in

Plan 9 on *aesthetic* grounds. As Carroll puts this anti-intentionalist's argument, "if a transgression interpretation of *Plan 9 from Outer Space* yields a more aesthetically satisfying encounter with the film, and our primary purpose in interpretation is in promoting maximum aesthetic satisfaction, why not suspend qualms about intention and take *Plan 9 from Outer Space* as a masterpiece of postmodernist disjunction *à la lettre*?"[27] And he responds by invoking again the *conversation thesis*. "But I submit," he writes, "that insofar as we have a conversational interest in artworks, we will want to reject this sort of aesthetic argument. For," he goes on, "if we take ourselves to be aiming at a genuine conversation, ignoring Wood's palpable intentions, it seems, to me, can only undermine our sense of ourselves as authentic participants in the conversation."[28]

There are, I think, two persuasive reasons for rejecting Carroll's response to *this* argument of the anti-intentionalist. To start with, it appears to be out of sync with the general strategy of Carroll's intentionalist defense, which, you will recall, goes something like this. The anti-intentionalist claims that providing aesthetic satisfaction is the sole purpose of art works *qua* artworks. Therefore, the sole purpose of criticism is to provide interpretations of artworks that maximize their potential for providing aesthetic satisfaction; and if the interpretation of any given artwork contradicts the artist's intention in so doing, so much the worse for the artist's intentions. But the anti-intentionalist is wrong in his assumption that the sole reason we come to artworks is for aesthetic satisfaction. We come also for "conversation" with the artwork's creator. And conversation is intention-dependent. So the anti-intentionalist is defeated by the revelation that not *all* the art-relevant features of artworks are intention-independent: aesthetic features are; meaning features, the content of conversation, are not.

If, however, that is the strategy of Carroll's intentionalist defense, he cannot then offer an intentionalist defense of aesthetic satisfaction. For he has already conceded aesthetic satisfaction to the anti-intentionalist.

Second, however, even if I am mistaken in the way I construe Carroll's defense of intentionalism, I do not think the *conversation thesis*

will work as a defense of intention-dependence for aesthetic features and aesthetic satisfaction. Here is why.

Let us return for a moment yet again to *Plan 9 from Outer Space*. One way to construe its transgressions of standard narrative structure, as we have seen, is as the means of expressing a thesis: a live hypothesis, as I see it, even though I may not believe it, that the Hollywood "filmmaking code" is repressive in some political, ideological way. And that manner of construing it is defeated by the *conversation thesis*. But suppose, rather, that we simply construe the transgressions as an interesting, somewhat novel way of *telling a story*. Under that interpretation, we are, I would say, aesthetically enjoying *the way* the story is told. And I find here no purchase for the *conversation thesis*. What would the conversation be about?

The anti-intentionalist *seems* to be on firm ground here. If the transgressions of normal, standard narrative structure in *Plan 9* are aesthetically interesting and provide abundant aesthetic satisfaction, why should it matter that they are the result of ineptitude rather than intention? Intention or no intention, they are aesthetically interesting and satisfying. The *conversation thesis* is an answer to the anti-intentionalist because conversation requires meaning to be conveyed, and meaning is intention-dependent. In one place, Carroll suggests we should "require that transgressions be intentional."[29] But if he means by that that transgressions, properly so called, are necessarily intentional, I believe he is mistaken. One can transgress unknowingly as well as knowingly, unintentionally as well as intentionally (although I think this is a verbal difference between us rather than one of substance). And the anti-intentionalist may well argue that this can be generalized for all aesthetic features. Whether intentional or not, *there they are*. And there seems no reason why the unintentional ones should not be acknowledged and enjoyed any more than the intended ones. The *conversation thesis* provides no escape here for the foes of anti-intentionalism.

We seem to be faced, then, with two alternatives. Either we accept a dualistic position that meaning features of artworks are intention-bound but aesthetic features are not, or we try to find a defense of

intentionalism for aesthetic features other than the *conversation thesis*. The latter alternative I shall explore in the penultimate section of the chapter.

CRAFT AND INTENTION

As I understand Carroll's argument, it implies a sharp distinction between aesthetic satisfaction we may take in experiencing works of art and the satisfaction we take in them as "conversation." Both are what I would term "artistic satisfaction," art-relevant satisfaction. And I believe Carroll is correct in maintaining that distinction rather than using the term "aesthetic" as a blanket term for *all* art-relevant satisfaction.

In keeping with this distinction, I will say that we take aesthetic satisfaction in the "aesthetic features" of artworks and conversational satisfaction in the "meaning features" of artworks: those that elicit conversation through the proposal of what I called, after William James, *live hypotheses*. And the question before us now is whether the aesthetic features of artworks are intention-bound and our aesthetic satisfaction in them as well, therefore, intention-bound.

It appears to me, as I have argued elsewhere, there is a strong *prima facie* attractiveness to the dualistic position that the meaning features of artworks are hostage to intention but the aesthetic features of artworks are not.[30] For, after all, there cannot be meaning without intention. But an aesthetically pleasing feature of an artwork is *there*, even though unintended or even accidental. Intentionality, it might be argued, is no more essential for an aesthetically pleasing narrative "transgression" than for an aesthetically pleasing sunset.

Ockham's razor, of course, favors a unitary view: that it is intention across the board, that aesthetic features, no less than meaning features, conversational features, as Carroll would have it, are intention-bound as well. But Ockham's razor cannot alone weigh the balance decisively in favor of intentionality. It provides a *motive* for finding an answer to the aesthetic anti-intentionalist. It cannot provide an *answer*.

But I think an answer is in the offing. It is, in a word, "craft" or, in another word, "skill."

The idea, quite simply, is that the aesthetic satisfaction we take in experiencing the aesthetic features of artworks of most kinds and in most periods of art history is a satisfaction in those features *as products of craft or skill*, and when that craft or skill attains a certain exalted level, as in the case of a Bach or a Michelangelo, it is the satisfaction in those features as products of artistic genius. We know that the violations of standard narrative structure in *Plan 9 from Outer Space* are not the results of craftsmanship or skill but ineptitude. They therefore cannot give us the aesthetic satisfaction that is to be gained from those aesthetic features that we know are the result of craft mastery. Furthermore, the products of craft *are* intention-bound. There cannot be unintended craft or skill. And so we now have our response to the aesthetic anti-intentionalist. The response, however, has to be qualified and spelled out more fully.

There is fairly robust experimental evidence, not to mention plain old folk wisdom, to the effect that our *beliefs* about the objects that pleasure us have a direct effect on the degree of our pleasure. Thus, if I believe that a bottle of wine is more expensive than it really is, it may taste better to me than if I knew the actual price. And, more to the point, if I believe that the broken, nonstandard narrative in *Plan 9* is the intentional result of skill or craft, it will give me *more* aesthetic satisfaction than it will if I come to believe that it is the result of unintended ineptitude. However, there is no denying that even when I come to know that the broken narrative is the result of unintended ineptitude, not craft or skill, I *still* may take *some* aesthetic pleasure in the way the narrative is constructed. And if this is an unwelcome conclusion, it is, nevertheless, a conclusion I think we will have to live with.

However, at this juncture, the anti-intentionalist may make the following proposal. I grant you, she will say, that when we *believe* an aesthetic feature of an artwork is the result of skill in one's craft rather than accident or ineptitude, we take more aesthetic pleasure in it. *Therefore*, the critic should bend every effort to convince her readers that the aesthetic features of the artwork she is discussing *are* the result of skill in one's craft, even if she knows full well that they are the result of accident or ineptitude. For at least *one* of her functions, *qua* critic, is

to maximize her readers' aesthetic satisfaction in the artworks she is discussing. It is the *big benevolent lie* theory of criticism.

Furthermore, she will add, you can't counter the *big benevolent lie* theory with Carroll's *conversation thesis* because we have already concluded that aesthetic features are not conversational features and therefore are not intention-bound through meaning intentions. They are intention-bound through skill and craft but are not, so to say, all-or-nothing intention-bound. Intention is a necessary condition on meaning. Hence, there can be no meaning without intention to mean and, therefore, no conversational satisfaction either, properly so called. There can, however, be *some* degree of aesthetic satisfaction in aesthetic features one believes to be the result of accident or ineptitude, *more* aesthetic satisfaction in aesthetic features one believes to be the result of skill in craft. So there appears to be no art-theoretic reason why the critic should not deceive her readers into believing that the aesthetic features of the artworks she is discussing are the result of skill in one's craft even though she knows full well that they are really the result of accident and ineptitude.

Of course, in order to work her deception, the critic must make sense of the artwork in terms of its aesthetic features, even though the creator of the artwork is inept and incompetent, the aesthetic features the result of ineptness and accident. And in the event, that may be impossible to accomplish in most (or perhaps even in all) cases. But, nonetheless, it is at least possible in principle, and it is a possibility we feel intuitively uncomfortable with.

But as I suggested above, I can see no art-theoretic way of ruling out the possibility. In other words, I can see no argument *internal* to art theory or aesthetics and philosophy of art for defeating the *big benevolent lie* theory of *aesthetic* criticism. So at this point, it would seem we must look for an argument *external* to art-theoretic considerations, *external* to the discipline of aesthetics and philosophy of art. And the most obvious place to look, I would think, is to moral considerations. Which is to say, what we will be obliged to reach for is not an aesthetic argument against the *big benevolent lie* theory of aesthetic criticism but a *moral* one.

Nor is a moral argument far to seek. For, after all, deception is a vice, truthfulness a virtue.

Of course, that deception is a vice hardly implies that there are not circumstances under which deception is morally justified and telling the truth precisely the wrong thing to do. But, after all, to endorse the *big benevolent lie* theory of aesthetic criticism is not merely to allow deception under certain circumstances. Rather, it is to endorse deception as a systematic, universal practice in aesthetic criticism. It would turn English departments into ministries of propaganda (if they are not already). In short, it would hardly be a morally attractive prospect to turn aesthetic criticism into institutionalized lying.

CONCLUSION

In this chapter, I have argued that Noël Carroll's *conversation thesis* is a correct response to the anti-intentionalist, although I amplified the response in claiming that the silent, "mental conversation" between art consumer and art creator is initiated by, and centers around, what I have called the live hypotheses that the artwork proposes for consideration in the gaps and afterlife of the art experience. Furthermore, I argued that the *conversation thesis* as a response to the anti-intentionalist was valid only where the features of the artworks were what I called meaning features. But where the features were *aesthetic* ones, the *conversation thesis* had no purchase because there seemed to be no sense in which aesthetic features of artworks could either initiate internal conversation or be the subject of such conversation in the gaps and afterlife.

But rather than concede aesthetic features to the anti-intentionalist, I proposed the hypothesis that a substantial part of the aesthetic satisfaction we take in the aesthetic features of artworks is dependent upon our belief that these aesthetic features are the result not of ineptitude or accident but of skill in one's craft, which, I pointed out, is intention-bound. In other words, intention is a necessary condition for both.

However, this response leaves it open to the anti-intentionalist to argue that, the critic's role being to maximize aesthetic pleasure, she is free to knowingly mislead the audience to artworks into believing

aesthetic features to be the result of skill and craft that are in fact the result of accident and ineptitude.

I responded to this anti-intentionalist ploy not with an aesthetic argument but, rather, with a moral one, which is to say, quite simply, that deception is a vice, even in the interest of maximizing aesthetic satisfaction. Whether Carroll would acquiesce in this strategy in response to the anti-intentionalist I do not know. But there are passages in his essay at least suggesting that he would, as they have a distinctly moral tone, at least to my ear, for example, where he writes, "In terms of self-esteem, we have an interest not only in not being gulled by the artist but also in not fooling ourselves."[31] Further consideration of this question, however, must await another occasion.

NOTES

1. Noël Carroll, "Art, Intention, and Conversation," in *Intention and Interpretation*, ed. Gary Iseminger (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1992), 117.
2. Ibid., 101.
3. Ibid., 114.
4. Ibid.
5. Ibid.
6. Ibid.
7. Ibid., 114–15.
8. Ibid., 117.
9. Ibid.
10. Ibid., 118, emphasis added.
11. Ibid.
12. Ibid.
13. See chapters 3 and 4 of this volume.
14. William James, *Essays in Pragmatism*, ed. Albury Castell (New York: Hafner, 1951).
15. Peter Kivy, *The Performance of Reading: An Essay in the Philosophy of Literature* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2006), 101–2.
16. Ibid., 107–11.
17. Carroll, "Art, Intention, and Conversation," 117, emphasis added.

18. Kivy, *The Performance of Reading*, 115.
19. Ibid., 116.
20. *Sophist* (263), in *The Dialogues of Plato*, trans. B. Jowett (New York: Random House, 1937), vol. 2, 274.
21. Carroll, “Art, Intention, and Conversation, 124.
22. Ibid., 119.
23. Ibid.
24. Ibid.
25. Ibid.
26. Ibid., 120.
27. Ibid., 120–21.
28. Ibid., 121.
29. Ibid., 120.
30. On this, see Peter Kivy, “Authorial Intention and the Pure Musical Parameters,” in *Sounding Off: Eleven Essays in the Philosophy of Music* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012).
31. Carroll, “Art, Intention, and Conversation,” 123.

Chapter 3

Facts from Fictions

A friend of mine was reading a detective novel, a whodunit, by someone whom I had not heard of before with a rather exotic-sounding name. I asked my friend how he was enjoying the read, and he replied that the author, a number of whose books he had already read, was an excellent storyteller. But what, he said, he particularly enjoyed was that Africa, rather than the usual places in Europe or the United States, was where this author's plots were set. "I've learned a lot about Africa reading these books," he added, "and that gives them, for me, an additional pleasure in the reading."

The remark seemed so *natural* to him, and as well to *me* and to the others present, that I thought to myself how odd it really was and how odd it would seem to my friend and the others if I were to tell them that a legion of philosophers of art out there were ready to pounce on any such claim as evincing, in some sense of the word, an entirely "improper" response or attitude toward a literary work, assuming they would take a humble whodunit to be a "literary work" at all.

Most of my readers, no doubt, will be well acquainted with what manner of thing the pouncers will say. Well you can, of course, they will say, *use* a novel to gain knowledge of some facts about the world that the novelist may inadvertently convey. You can also, after all, use a novel as a doorstop (if, that is, you think your copy of the text is "the novel"). But to use it for either purpose is to *misuse* it. And to enjoy deriving factual knowledge from a novel, as my friend does, is, in some normative sense or other, to have "inappropriate" enjoyment—an "illicit" pleasure if you will. And in *that* respect, then, my friend is reading the novel "improperly." Thus, to instance a case in point, Berys Gaut, a distinguished philosopher of art, writes,

> one can learn much about Victorian agricultural politics from *Tess*, and on the subject of nineteenth-century whaling practices *Moby Dick* is excruciatingly informative. . . . [B]ut these cognitive merits do not thereby improve the objects *qua* works of art.[1]

In this chapter, I am going to defend the opposite thesis. And I will begin by introducing the general question of novels as possible sources of knowledge, of which the "facts from fictions," with which I am concerned here, are a special case.

KNOWLEDGE FROM FICTION

The question of whether novels are a legitimate source of knowledge, whether, to put it in a slightly different way, novels *qua* novels are a source of knowledge, has been a hotly debated topic among philosophers of art in recent years, with emphasis usually being placed on moral knowledge. But that is not a debate I wish to enter into here. Rather, I am defending the, to many, far more obviously false thesis that novels are a legitimate source of factual knowledge about the world—as it is, as it was, in the author's time, and before; that the gaining of such knowledge is part of our enjoyment of novels, *qua* novels; that that is a legitimate part of, if I may so put it, the practice of novel-reading. Furthermore, I will be defending as part of this thesis the view that it is a literary merit of a novel that purports to impart such facts, that they are indeed *facts*, not falsehoods, and, of course, a literary demerit if they are falsehoods, not facts.

But lest the reader be troubled, right from the get-go, by the very notion that a work of *fiction* might be faulted for errors of *fact* or, what, after all, *seems* more reasonable, be applauded for having the facts correct, let me adduce an obvious, uncontroversial example of just that very thing, if properly construed. I refer to the frequent criticism of works of fiction that exhibit *implausible* plots. For what, after all, is an implausible plot other than a plot that falsely represents reality, has not got straight the facts of the world as we know them. So to instance a case in point, Dr. Johnson famously wrote of the plot of *Cymbeline*: "to remark the folly of the fiction, the absurdity of the conduct, . . . and *the impossibility of the events in any system of life*, were to waste criticism upon unresisting imbecility, upon faults too evident for detection, and too gross for aggravation."[2] In other words, Shakespeare, as Dr. Johnson perceives it, is positing for us, in his fiction, a possible reality that is not, in fact, a possible reality. I see little difference between this and the

accusation that a novelist has got so many of her facts wrong about the antebellum South that it mars an otherwise commendable fiction. As Stacie Friend writes, and, I believe, correctly so, "we are much less forgiving about mistakes or falsifications in non-fiction [than in fiction]. But because we expect authors of fiction to be accurate about general real-world facts, we are also critical of mistakes or of falsifications that have no artistic justification."[3]

Before, however, I go any further with the defense of my thesis, I want to put this thesis, what I will call the *informational communication* function of novels,[4] which is to say, the thesis that novels legitimately, *qua* novelistic works of art, communicate factual information to their readers, in contrast with my previously stated view about how novels serve as sources of human knowledge, which I will call here their *hypothesis proposal* function.[5] In previous writings of mine, I have expressed the view that *one* of the functions of *some* novels is to propose to the reader what I called, after William James, "live hypotheses."[6] In his well-known essay "The Will to Believe," James distinguished between "live hypotheses," which is to say, hypotheses that, even though the one contemplating them might not presently believe them, are hypotheses he thinks might possibly be true and to whose truth he might possibly be persuaded.[7] These were opposed to "dead hypotheses"—hypotheses that the person who contemplates them not only disbelieves but that he thinks are so thoroughly discredited that he cannot imagine any evidence or argument possibly persuading him of their truth.

I proposed, further, that the live hypotheses that serious novels propose are hypotheses concerning the deep, perennial problems of philosophy, morality, psychology, human relations, and other human concerns and that these hypotheses are meant to be thought about by the reader in what I called the "gaps" and the "afterlife" of the novel-reading experience. The gaps are the intervals between the time one puts down the novel after reading it for a while and the time one picks it up again to continue one's reading since a novel of any substantial length cannot be and is not meant to be read at one go. The afterlife is

the period following completion of the novel, when its contents still lingers on in the reader's memory.

As well, I suggested that what goes on in the reader's mind, during the gaps and afterlife, is a kind of silent conversation with one's self, or, perhaps, with the author, as the reader might imagine him or her responding to the reader's queries and arguments. And I averred that *one* of the good-making features of *some* novels is their expressing live hypotheses, *one* of the demerits of *some* novels their expressing dead hypotheses.

The *informational* function of novels and the *hypothesis proposal* function of novels constitute, then, what I take to be, together, the novel's way of serving as a source for human knowledge. I shall call the claim that novels legitimately perform the former function the *informational communication thesis*, the latter the *hypothesis proposal thesis*. It is the former, the *informational communication thesis*, that I intend to defend in what follows.

A MORE SERIOUS EXAMPLE

I began this discussion adducing what many would characterize as a less-than-outstanding example of the novel. What can we conclude, such exponents of the novel as *literature*, as "high art," might well ask, from the lowly whodunit, and those who read it for whatever trivial pleasure it may afford them, perhaps the pleasure in gaining factual knowledge therefrom? What the philosopher of art must be concerned with is the novel as *literature*, as "high art," and it is that kind of novel and its reader that, it is claimed, has nothing to do with the imparting of factual knowledge or the pleasure therein, *qua* novel, *qua* "high art."

Now I suspect I have a more liberal view of "literature," properly so called, than someone who might make the objection to the whodunit as literature that I framed above.[8] But I have neither desire nor need to get into that here. Rather, I will simply sidestep the issue and adduce another example of the novel that will surely be on everyone's list of novels as *literature*, as "high art," namely, Herman Melville's masterpiece, *Moby Dick*.

What makes *Moby Dick* such a rich example, both for me and for my potential opponents, is not merely the quantity of information conveyed in it concerning whales and whaling in nineteenth-century New England, which is considerable, but rather the out-front manner in which some of this information is conveyed. Readers will remember, especially in the latter regard, Chapter XXXII, called "Cetology," which goes into great detail, some may say excruciating detail, about the biology of whales as it was known in Melville's day.

Those who find this chapter in *Moby Dick*, as I think many do, a cumbersome appendage to the novel, perfectly permissible to be skipped, I think are making a serious mistake in critical judgment. For Chapter XXXII, for all of its non-novelistic appearance, is completely consistent with Ishmael's mode of expression throughout the work, completely consistent as well with Melville's, alias Ishmael's, love affair with whales and whaling. It is fully in sync with the aesthetic of *Moby Dick*. One skips at one's peril.

Furthermore, that one learns about whales in Chapter XXXII was Melville's intention, I argue, and our taking pleasure in the gaining of that knowledge from reading the chapter is legitimate pleasure in the novel, *qua* novel, not some illegitimate use of the novel for non-novelistic purposes. Needless to say, these claims must be defended against the skeptic, and I will be doing so anon. But before I get to that, I must contrast this manner of conveying facts through a novel with another, far more common one.

I will call Chapter XXXII of *Moby Dick* an example of the *direct* conveying of factual knowledge. I think such in-your-face examples of the *direct* manner of imparting factual knowledge in novels must be fairly rare. What is very common is the *indirect* manner, where factual knowledge is conveyed to the reader through descriptions of the places that the characters inhabit and in which their adventures occur, the descriptions of the various accoutrements that constitute the characters' environments, the way in which the characters speak and conduct their affairs, and so on. Thus, to stay with our example, we have Ishmael's description of New Bedford, Nantucket, the hunting and harpooning of whales, the extraction of whale oil from blubber, life on a Nantucket whaler, and so on. Upon finishing *Moby Dick*, it would be an inattentive

reader indeed who did not come away from the experience with considerable knowledge of the whaling industry in nineteenth-century New England and the people who engaged in it, gleaned from these various descriptions, albeit indirectly, as a result of reading them as part of the fictional narrative.

Now, of course, no one denies that novels can impart factual knowledge both *directly* and *indirectly*, as I have claimed *Moby Dick* does. But what most philosophers of art and literary theorists would, I think, deny is that the imparting of such knowledge is part of the novel's proper function, *qua* novel, *qua* artwork. And, therefore, they would deny as well that the pleasure the reader may take in the gaining of such factual knowledge from novel-reading is pleasure in the novel, *qua* novel, *qua* artwork, so it is in that sense, so to say, "illegitimate pleasure."

I believe, however, that such skeptics, as I have been calling them, are seriously mistaken. I believe that *one* of the functions of *some* novels, *qua* novel, *qua* artwork, *is* the imparting, directly and indirectly, of factual knowledge and, furthermore, that the pleasure readers take in gaining such knowledge from novels that impart it is pleasure in the novels, *qua* novel, *qua* artwork, as surely as is the pleasure they take in the story the novel tells. It is, in other words, in this sense, "legitimate pleasure." These claims must, of course, be defended against the skeptic. And I shall do that by raising, one by one, what I take to be the major skeptical objections to my view and, one by one, attempting to answer them.

INTENTION

One who believes that the author's *intention* to have his novel function in a certain art-relevant way or to possess certain art-relevant features is a necessary (though not sufficient) condition for the novel possessing that function or those features will have an obvious response to my *informational communication* thesis. Perhaps she will grant that, in rare cases of *direct* communication of factual knowledge, like Chapter XXXII of *Moby Dick*, the author did indeed intend to impart factual knowledge to the reader. But, she will insist, where the factual knowledge is imparted *indirectly*, in his various descriptions of places, characters, events, and so

forth, the author had no intention at all of imparting factual knowledge to the reader. His intentions had only to do with the construction of his fictional narrative through such descriptions. Thus, any factual knowledge the reader might glean from such descriptions, as well as any pleasure the reader might take in the gleaning of such factual knowledge from the same, is entirely *unintentional* and, therefore, completely irrelevant to the novel, *qua* novel, *qua* artwork. I will call this skeptic the *intentionalist* and her view *intentionalist criticism*.

However, needless to say, there are abroad in the world many who do not share the intentionalist's view of criticism. They will insist that the author's intentions are irrelevant to literary criticism and by no means a necessary condition for the presence of art-relevant features in the novel. Such theorists, therefore, will have to find objections to the *informational communication* thesis other than the intentionalist objections just adduced.

But, alas, I am a dyed-in-the-wool *intentionalist*. So the easy victory of the *anti-intentionalist* over the skeptic is not an option for me. I am obliged to defend the *informational communication* thesis on *intentionalist* grounds. Here then is my defense.

A word first about authorial intentions in general. When I say that Melville intended this or that or the other literary effect in *Moby Dick*, I am not, of course, suggesting that he must have had running through his head while he wrote a series of thoughts all of the form, *now I intend this*, *now I intend that*, *now I intend the other*, and so on. That is nonsense. But the obvious having been stated, I think it unnecessary for my purposes to launch into an extensive analysis of the concept of intention, which, in any event, I am certainly not prepared to do. For if we agree that when Melville wrote all of those things about whales and whaling he was exhibiting paradigm instances of intentional behavior and that his intentions were directed toward the end of producing a fictional narrative known as the novel, that is all I require.

The question, then, is whether Melville, when writing all of those things about whales and whaling to the end of producing a fictional narrative known as the novel, had the *additional* intention of imparting factual knowledge of whales and whaling to his readers. And the skeptic says "No." Writing all these things about whales and whaling had the

incidental side effect of imparting factual knowledge of whales and whaling to generations of readers. But an incidental side effect it was, not one of Melville's novelistic intentions. From which it follows, so the skeptic concludes, that being unintentional, the imparting of factual knowledge of whales and whaling is not a function of *Moby Dick*, *qua* novel, *qua* artwork, nor is the pleasure the reader may take in the acquiring of such knowledge a legitimate novelistic pleasure.

To begin to answer the skeptic, I am going to appeal to a version of what is known to ethicists as the doctrine of double effect. The doctrine, of course, was originally formulated to absolve agents from moral blame for harmful and unwanted, but nonetheless anticipated and unavoidable, side effects of otherwise well-intentioned actions. In Thomas Nagel's concise formulation, "the principle states that one is sometimes permitted knowingly to bring about or permit as a side effect of one's actions something which it would be absolutely impermissible to bring about or permit deliberately as an end or as a means."[9]

Let us then apply the doctrine of double effect to Melville's writing all of those things about whales and whaling with the intended goal of producing a fictional literary narrative known as the novel, with this crucial difference. The side effect of the intended action is not an undesirable or unwanted one, as in the traditional doctrine of double effect, but, rather, a positive, distinctly desirable, and valuable one: the imparting of factual knowledge about whales and whaling, and the pleasing thereby of the reader. Is it, though, an "intended" effect?

In the traditional doctrine of double effect, the intended result is a positive one and the side effect an unwanted or negative result. But the latter certainly is intended as well in the sense that it is not an accidental, unanticipated result but rather a result that the agent is well aware will follow inevitably, predictably, from the intended action. It is, of course, unintended in the sense of being unwanted, and were there a way to avoid the side effect while achieving the desired result, the agent would of course avail herself of it. To call the side effect "unintended," *sans phrase*, however, when the anticipated result of an intended action, seems unjustified.

What then of the side effect in *Moby Dick*? That is to say, is the side effect of imparting factual knowledge about whales and whaling through the intended action of writing about whales and whaling to forward a fictional narrative an *intended* result or not? Well, if the *unwanted* side effect in the traditional doctrine of double effect is, at least in a recognizable sense, an intended effect, surely the *desirable* side effect in the literary case, of imparting knowledge and pleasure, should, *a fortiori*, be counted *intentional*. And so the intentionalist skeptic has been answered by the intentionalist.

Unfortunately, though, victory over the intentionalist does not come so cheaply. I think we are halfway there in showing that the imparting of factual knowledge, although a side effect of the novelist's endeavors, is an *intentional* side effect. However, that is not enough. We must go on to show that it is the right *kind* of intention. We must show, in other words, that the novelist not only intends the welcome side effect but also intends it as a feature of the novel *qua* novel, *qua* artwork, and not merely a useful but also an extraneous outcome, extraneous to his goals as a novelist. I take that next step now.

PRACTICE

My task is to show that some novelists, in some novels, have the intention of conveying factual knowledge to their readers, as part of what might be called the novel experience, *qua* novel experience, and not merely as, so to speak, an unexpected but desirable door prize, like winning a set of dishes at a double feature. But how, one wonders, can such a task be accomplished? I can, I think, be reasonably confident that Melville did indeed *intend* the side effect of imparting to the reader factual knowledge about whales and whaling through his narrative, in the sense of "intend" that I outlined above in the context of the doctrine of double effect. The text gives ample evidence of that. How, though, could I possibly go on to fine-tune that intention: to determine, that is, whether it is an intention to impart factual knowledge to the reader as part of the novel experience, *qua* novel, *qua* novel experience, and ditto for the pleasure the reader takes in acquiring such knowledge? The text gives no clue, and I cannot ask the author.

The answer to this conundrum, I think, is not far to seek or very much of a surprise. The novel is part of a literary tradition, a *practice* if you will, that stretches, for us, as far back as the Homeric epics and the Old Testament. Furthermore, philosophical and art-theoretic discussion concerning this practice stretches at least as far back as Plato. And it is a practice, I suggest, that has *always* included the imparting of factual knowledge as one of literature's legitimate functions, *qua* literature. That being the case, it seems a reasonable assumption that if a novel imparts factual knowledge, the imparting of such knowledge and the pleasure that goes with it were intended by its author, as a proper *novelistic* function, unless there is strong evidence to the contrary in the particular instance.

Suppose the skeptic should make reply that any factual knowledge novels may impart is far better and more accurately and more thoroughly imparted by the appropriate specialized disciplines. If you want to find out about whale biology or whaling in nineteenth-century New England, then read a biology text or a history text, not *Moby Dick*, the skeptic will urge.

The skeptic, taken literally, is right—but strangely irrelevant. *Of course*, if you wake up one morning with a strong desire to bone up on the history of whaling in nineteenth-century New England, you will do well to pick up a history text on the subject and not *Moby Dick*. But what of it? On the other hand, if you wake up in the morning with a strong desire to read a great and enthralling novel and *Moby Dick* comes to hand, you may very well become engrossed in it in part because it caters to your curiosity about whaling in nineteenth-century New England. Have you made a mistake? Should you put the novel down as soon as you realize what's happening and pick up that history text instead?

The skeptic says that you will get more knowledge-about-whaling pleasure per hour from reading a history text than from reading *Moby Dick*. And, after all, it's pleasure you're after. Right? Why else would one usually read a novel? But aside from the obvious fact that *Moby Dick* has other pleasures to offer besides knowledge-about-whaling pleasure, pleasure, *pace* the simplistic hedonist, is not a negotiable currency like dollars and cents. You can substitute ten one-dollar bills for a ten-spot without loss. But there is no such equality between one hour of

knowledge-about-whaling pleasure from *Moby Dick* and one hour of knowledge-about-whaling pleasure from a history book. What the reader of *Moby Dick* is experiencing, of course, is a particular pleasure: the pleasure of knowledge about whaling imparted by a novel; it is not replaceable by pleasure of knowledge about whaling imparted by a history book, even if, *per impossibile*, we could quantify the amount of knowledge-pleasure each produced per unit of time.

Furthermore, the knowledge factor seems clearly a part of informal critical discourse. My friend counted the knowledge to be gained about Africa from reading the whodunit as one of its virtues. And a reader of *Moby Dick*, if asked how she liked it, might very well reply, "Well, it has its moments. But I found out more about whaling in nineteenth-century New England than I really wanted to know." If such comments, by qualified readers, are to be rejected as illegitimate, even though they seem to be a part of literary practice and in one form or another have been since antiquity, we are justified in demanding a persuasive reason why.

TESTIMONY

Well here, perhaps, is one such reason. To accept the purported facts imparted to you by Herman Melville about whaling in nineteenth-century New England or those purported facts about Victorian England imparted to you by Charles Dickens is simply, as the saying goes, "to take their word for it." And why, the skeptic continues, should you take a novelist's word for *anything*. Novelists, after all, are *fiction makers*. And is not fiction the very opposite of fact?

The objection, of course, is as old as Plato's suspicion of the widespread belief, as he sees it, that "good poets do really know the subjects about which they seem to the multitude to speak well."[10] For, as his well-known indictment of the poets goes, "all writers of poetry, beginning with Homer, copy unsubstantial images of every subject about which they write, including virtue, and do not grasp the truth."[11]

Now no contemporary skeptic is likely to invoke Platonic metaphysics in expressing *his* doubts as to whether the writers of fiction, Melville, Dickens, *et alia*, "do really know the subjects about which they

seem to the multitude to speak well." For I trust that the contemporary skeptic does not define knowledge as acquaintance with the Platonic forms.

But the contemporary skeptic does have another string to his bow. For all that can be claimed as support for the purported facts conveyed by the novelists and other writers of fiction is the authority of *testimony*. We believe it because we are *told* it. Does that make it *knowledge*?

The skeptic's argument in this regard can take two forms: a *strong* form and a *weak* one.

We are up against here, as some of my readers will have perceived, a well-known problem in contemporary epistemology: the problem of whether, or how, testimony can qualify as a source of knowledge, which is to say, justified true belief. And the strong form of the skeptical argument would simply be to the effect that testimony is not a *bona fide* source of knowledge properly so called. The purported facts or information we gain from novels and other fictional literature is by testimony. Therefore, it does not constitute knowledge.

The strong form of the argument, however, is not a very likely candidate. The complete rejection of testimony as a source of knowledge is an extreme position to contemplate. For the degree to which ordinary mortals rely on testimony for what they take themselves to know is so great that one wonders what would be left for us to know in its absence.

Needless to say, an enormous amount of what, at least, we *think* we know is not what we have found out and verified for ourselves but rather what has been imparted to us by those whom we think we have reason to believe are reliable sources of the purported knowledge they impart. And I think I have a right to assume, for the sake of the present argument, that much of what we learn from reliable testimony is, indeed, knowledge, properly so called. But I will have to leave it to the epistemologists to work it all out.

So it is, rather, the *weak* form of the skeptic's argument that is necessary to answer here, to wit, that although *reliable* testimony is a valid source of knowledge, unreliable testimony of course is not, and, furthermore, the testimony as to matters of purported fact on the part of writers of fiction is *never* reliable testimony. Writers of fiction are by

nature *unreliable* givers of testimony and never to be trusted. For as Plato long ago insisted, they "do not grasp the truth."

Now surely it would be far too easy a victory for the skeptic to argue that "fiction" by definition is "falsehood" and, therefore, that makers of fictional works, such as novelists and playwrights, are by definition unreliable sources of testimonial knowledge. For one thing, even though "That's pure fiction" is a colloquialism for "That's false," what distinguishes works of fiction from works of history, or biography, or whatever, is not the simplistic distinction between the true and the false. And for another, it is just a matter of fact, if I may so put it, that works of fiction convey true information about the world and were intended by their makers to do so.

Thus, the task of the skeptic who advances the weak argument must be to show that makers of fictional works are poor sources of testimonial knowledge, not simply because they are makers of *fiction* but for some reason independent of that. And what sort of reason could that be?

We are not, I do not think, going to fall for Plato's facile *reductio ad absurdum* to the effect that if the fiction makers are reliable sources of testimonial knowledge, then we must turn to Homer to gain knowledge of "war, and the conduct of campaigns, and the administration of cities, and the education of man."[12] One presumes that common sense will have a role in determining when it is prudent to rely on an author's testimony and when it is not and on what subjects he or she is qualified to give information about.

I suggest then that, since time out of mind, and rightly so, the distinguished creators of the Western literary canon have been taken to be sources of wisdom and knowledge. Of course, we must evaluate their credentials for wisdom or knowledge on a case-by-case basis as to both the quality of their credentials and what those credentials are credentials specifically *for*. But that being said, I am, I believe, justified in thinking that Dickens had his facts straight about Victorian England and Melville his facts straight about whaling and "the watery part of the world."

Furthermore, I venture the generalization that we ordinary folks get large quantities of factual knowledge (and pleasure therefrom) through

our encounters with the great fictional works of the Western canon. That our great authors sometimes got it wrong I have no doubt. And so here, as elsewhere, a second opinion is advisable.

But if such knowledge as we get from our novels and poems and plays is to be rejected solely on the basis of its source being *testimony*, then I do not know the age of the earth, that Washington crossed the Delaware, and the present state of my health. So I will assume for the sake of my argument here that testimony *is* a source of knowledge. *That* ball is in the epistemologists' court.

But the skeptic, alas, is still with us. For even if he accepts that novels can be a source of knowledge through testimony, he will now make this reply. Even if the reader were to discover that all of the purported facts about whales and whaling in *Moby Dick* were not "facts" at all but woven out of whole cloth or due to Melville's ignorance of the truth, it would affect her evaluation of the novel neither a jot nor a tittle. And if the truth or falsity of the represented facts, either directly or indirectly communicated ones, is irrelevant to our evaluation of the novel, then the communication of such facts, even when they *are* facts, cannot be a proper function of the novel, *qua* novel, *qua* artwork. As well, this can, of course, be generalized to apply to *all* novels that communicate facts, either directly or indirectly.

This form of objection to the thesis that novels are a proper source of knowledge is, many of my readers will know, a common one in the literature. It is time now for it to be confronted.

THE VALUE QUESTION

Now the most obvious point to make, for starters, is that the *informational communication* thesis attaches a *pro tanto* value to the truth or falsity of the purported "facts" that novels may *directly* or *indirectly* convey.[13] In other words, for a novel that conveys, either directly or indirectly, purported facts, the falsity of any purported fact is a bad-making feature of the novel, the truth of any purported fact a good-making feature. But a novel, of course, may be good in spite of having the facts wrong if other good-making features are present to outweigh the bad, and a novel may be bad in spite of having its facts

right and conveying an abundance of them if other bad-making features are present to outweigh the good. So with that trivial point out of the way, we can get down to business.

Let me begin by, as it were, starting from the opposite end. Suppose I were to discover that, *per impossibile*, the whole setting of *The Lord of the Rings* and the kinds of creatures that inhabit it do really exist in some remote place: that there are, in fact, hobbits, and Middle Earth, and the rest. Note well that I am not suggesting that Tolkien's epic is nonfiction. The story and characters are, as I thought, invented. But the world in which Tolkien imagines his story to take place is a part of *our* world, as is the world of *Great Expectations* or *Moby Dick*. And the *kinds* of characters whose adventures he invents are *real* kinds, as are the kinds of characters, human beings, that is, in Dickens and Melville. And the question I pose is, would this make the books that make up *The Lord of the Rings* better books?

I can't answer that question. But I can suggest how it would have to be answered. For in discovering that *The Lord of the Rings* is about kinds of creatures who really exist, in a kind of place that resembles closely a place in the real world, as Dickens's London resembles real Victorian London and Melville's Nantucket real nineteenth-century Nantucket, I would have discovered as well that *The Lord of the Rings* belongs to a different literary genre from the one to which I previously thought it belonged. In short, I would have discovered that *The Lord of the Rings* belongs not to the genre "fantasy novel" but to the genre "realistic novel." And I would have to evaluate it accordingly since, as is widely accepted, to evaluate any artwork properly, we must evaluate it under the right genre description.

And now, to get to the point, if, *per impossibile*, I should discover that Melville wove whales, whaling, New Bedford, Nantucket, and the rest out of whole cloth—that these were neither direct nor indirect communications of matters of fact but pure authorial fantasy—I would have discovered that *Moby Dick* does not belong to the literary genre "realistic novel" (or, perhaps, "realistic-mythic novel") but the genre "fantasy novel," like the real *The Lord of the Rings*. And, of course, I would have to evaluate it accordingly. Which is to say, it would no more be a defect in it that there are no such things as whales or whaling than

a defect in *The Lord of the Rings* that there are no such things as hobbits or a place called Middle Earth.

However, *Moby Dick* is an example of the genre "realistic novel," or at least a genre closely enough related to it such that "realism," "faithfulness to the facts," is a merit, the opposite a defect. And now the question is, how would my evaluation of the work be affected, if at all, were I to begin to discover errors of fact in the work about whales and whaling, New Bedford and Nantucket, and the rest?

Let me begin with a more obvious, because more extreme, example. A writer on Britain's role in the American Civil War has this to say about *Uncle Tom's Cabin*: "The depressing and grisly portrayal of slavery in *Uncle Tom's Cabin* articulated what the British had long suspected was the truth—despite the South's self-deception as an agrarian paradise of courtly manners, charming plantations, and contented slaves."[14] And she quotes one of the Confederacy's envoys to Great Britain in this wise: "The anti-Slavery sentiment [in Great Britain] is universal. *Uncle Tom's Cabin* has been read and *believed*."[15]

The case of *Uncle Tom's Cabin* is an obvious and extreme one because of its out-front polemical purpose. Harriet Beecher Stowe intended the novel to be a vehement denunciation of the South's "peculiar institution" and a clarion call to antislavery sentiment in the North. It was, needless to say, intended to communicate knowledge of the true, cruel nature of chattel slavery in the southern states. And whether it expressed the *truth* about slavery was the central issue. The Confederacy's emissary to Great Britain makes this crystal clear when he excoriates the British reading public for *believing* it. The stakes in its truth or falsity could not have been higher. "So you're the little woman who wrote the book that made this great war!" Lincoln is reported to have said when introduced to the author.[16]

I dare say that the cruel facts of slavery conveyed in a novel made them far more accessible and more widely disseminated than those conveyed in the many articles and orations of the abolitionists. And the skeptic may say that a novel can certainly be crafted for that purpose. But it is *not*, the skeptic will insist, a *novelistic* purpose. Nor is it a

novelistic purpose for it to convey historical knowledge of slavery to *us*, long after its demise.

But surely anyone uninitiated into recent formalist and "aesthetic" literary theory will find it utterly mind-boggling to be told that the accuracy or inaccuracy of the depiction of slavery in the antebellum southern states is completely irrelevant to our evaluation of *Uncle Tom's Cabin* as a novel. And it *is* a novel, not a tract, although its literary merits may not be in the class of Melville or Dickens, who *also* meant, among other things, to communicate facts about the times and places in which they lived their lives. And just to sharpen the point, I quote from a recent writer for the *New York Times*: "Tuesday is the bicentenary of the birth, in Portsmouth, England, of Charles Dickens, literature's greatest humanist. We can rejoice that so many of the evils he assailed with his beautiful, ferocious quill—dismal debtors' prisons, barefoot urchin labor, an indifferent nobility—have happily been reformed into oblivion."[17] Now I put it to you how truly off the wall this writer—and his readers—would consider the claim that he was not saying anything in praise of Dickens's novels as novels, as literary works of art, when he wrote of these things that Dickens "assailed with his beautiful, ferocious quill"—that, indeed, it didn't count as a literary merit of these works that the "facts" against which Dickens railed were *facts*.

Where the skeptic is coming from, in this regard, is graphically brought out by Nicholas Wolterstorff's engaging description of his first encounter with one of the canonical texts in the twentieth-century philosophy of art. Wolterstorff writes, "I well remember my experience of reading for the first time, about forty years ago, the chapter on evaluation in Monroe Beardsley's classic book, *Aesthetics*. It was like peeling an onion." He continues, in part,

> Suppose you are told that the poems had a great political impact on those who
> read them. Do you thereby know anything about the aesthetic quality of the poetry? Of course not. . . . Suppose you are told that the painting dealt with large and important political themes. Do you thereby know anything about the aesthetic quality of the painting? Of course not. Suppose you are told that the theme of the novel

> was offensively racist. Do you thereby know anything about the aesthetic quality of the novel? Of course not. And so it went, for many pages, until we arrived at the tiny heart of the onion, pure aesthetic qualities.[18]

Perhaps peeling the *Uncle Tom's Cabin* onion would not leave very much, the skeptic might well maintain. For there isn't very much to it if the antislavery message is peeled away—little in the way of real aesthetic, which is to say, real novelistic, literary values. But if you peel the Melville onion or the Dickens onion, that is a very different matter. There will be aesthetic, literary, novelistic features left in abundance at the not so "tiny heart."

Now I have no wish to enter into a discussion of the literary merits (or lack thereof) of *Uncle Tom's Cabin* or for the matter of Melville or Dickens. Such a discussion would be quite irrelevant to the matter at hand, which is, of course, the *validity* of the onion peeling itself, whatever its result, whatever aesthetic properties, the only art-relevant ones, so it is assumed, may be left in the process.

Wolterstorff writes of Beardsley, "He just assumed that to treat a work of art as a work of art . . . you have to attend only to its aesthetic qualities."[19] Lying behind the assumption for art in general and for the novel in particular, which is our concern here, is, I think, an *essentialist* quest for *that*, to stick with the novel, which *it*, and *only* it, can provide or, at least, which *it* can provide as its sole function *qua* novel, in an exemplary way, as opposed to other "objects." And the "that," of course, is aesthetic satisfaction, its source aesthetic features.

But as Noël Carroll, among others, has persuasively argued, "in dealing with artworks [*qua* artworks] we have more interests than aesthetic interests—as 'aesthetic interests' are usually construed within the philosophical tradition—and . . . there is no reason to think that these interests are always trumped by aesthetic ones."[20] That readers of novels have other interests besides aesthetic interests in them, one of those interests being the acquiring of factual knowledge, is beyond doubt. And the burden of proof is, it appears to me, on the essentialist to show that those interests, the acquiring of factual knowledge in

particular, are not legitimate novelistic interests, just because other texts besides novels serve those interests too. So far, to my mind, essentialists have come up empty-handed here, as elsewhere.

So think, now, of the facts communicated about slavery by Harriet Beecher Stowe in *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, the facts about whales and whaling in nineteenth-century New England communicated by Herman Melville in *Moby Dick*, and the facts about child abuse and poverty in Victorian England communicated by Charles Dickens in his great novels. Think particularly of how closely associated we feel they are with the very essence and substance of these novels. And think as well of what the vast community of these novels' readers, the readers, I should think, for whom their authors intended them, would say to the charge that this knowledge conveyed was somehow extraneous and irrelevant to their experience of these works and the pleasure they take in acquiring it somehow illicit—not pleasure that a sophisticated novel reader should take in such works. Consider how they would respond were they told that they should strip that knowledge away to reveal the "true" substance and essence of the novel's heart, where the only legitimate source of novelistic pleasures lies.

So perhaps at this point, we should give some further thought to the "pleasure question." I turn to that now.

THE PLEASURE OF KNOWING

Aristotle famously adduced, as one of the sources of our pleasure in poetry, the fact that "learning things is most enjoyable, not only for philosophers but for others equally, though they have little experience of it."[21] Readers of the *Poetics* will of course remember that, in this regard, he distinguished between poetry and history in that "the historian relates what happened, the poet what might happen."[22] But in relating what might possibly happen, he observed, the poet's path is through what *has* happened because "we are apt to distrust what has not yet happened as not possible, whereas what has happened is obviously possible, else it could not have happened."[23]

That Aristotle—and a long tradition of literary theory and practice—would be in direct conflict with the idea that pleasure in learning is an

illegitimate pleasure when produced by literary fiction seems clear enough. Even Plato's denunciation of the poets—which some believe Aristotle is responding to in the passages I have just quoted—implicitly assumes, in a funny sort of backhanded way, such knowledge and pleasure. For the skeptic, as I represented him, acknowledged that the novel, for which read "literary fiction," *can* and sometimes *does* impart knowledge, although the knowledge and the pleasure we take in it is not relevant to it as what it essentially *is*, whereas Plato is deploring the "fact," as he sees it, that poetry *cannot* impart knowledge, or the pleasure therein, but would gladly embrace it, *as poetry*, if poetry *could*; for we are, he assures Glaucon, "cordially desirous that it *should* appear perfectly excellent and *true*."[24]

Why would one think that the pleasure that so many take in the process of deriving *facts* from *fictions* is somehow an illegitimate or illicit pleasure?

Perhaps "illicit" is too strong a word. But in any case, what we are pursuing here is what can justify us in calling a pleasure in the most general sense "bad" or, for the matter of that, a pain "good." For, after all, is not pleasure just inherently good, pain inherently bad? How can there be a bad pleasure or a good pain?

It seems clear that since a pleasure can't be bad, *qua* pleasure, or a pain good, *qua* pain, these evaluative terms must be being applied in virtue of some relation that the pleasure or pain bears to something else that *can* be bad or good. Thus, sadistic pleasure is bad in virtue of its being caused by something bad happening to someone, which is to say, the infliction of pain, whereas pain that warns one of an impending injury to be avoided is a good pain. But it is hard to see how the pleasure taken in gaining knowledge from a novel can be bad simply in virtue of its being caused by the novel-reading.

Of course, a pleasure might be bad in virtue of its involving something harmful, for example, the pleasure in smoking. And if taking pleasure in the acquiring of factual knowledge from *Moby Dick* were to prevent the reader from paying attention to other of its pleasure-producing literary features, *that* might well constitute it a bad pleasure. But this would hardly distinguish *that* kind of pleasure from any other

pleasure, uncontroversially novelistic, taken in *Moby Dick*, which, if excessively indulged in, might prevent the reader from taking pleasure in other of its equally novelistic features, for example, becoming so engrossed in the beauty of the language that one lost track of the narrative. In other words, there seems no harmful result endemic to the pleasure taken in gaining factual knowledge from a novel if it does not interfere with other novelistic appreciation, nor is there any reason to believe that there necessarily need be any such interference.

CONCLUSION

We are left then with the conclusion that the pleasure taken in facts gleaned from reading novels is not "illicit" pleasure in the sense of a "bad" pleasure, as explained above, so the skeptic must be calling such pleasure, instead, "illegitimate" in the sense of not being pleasure taken in the novel *qua* novel, *qua* artwork—irrelevant, in other words. But this seems to bring us round full circle. For the skeptic now owes us a defense of the claim that the pleasure taken in gleaning knowledge from novels is not pleasure taken in the novel *qua* novel because the function of imparting such knowledge is not a function of the novel *qua* novel.

But what is the skeptic to say in his defense? If he claims that the imparting of factual knowledge is not an intention of the novelist, he has already been answered. If he claims that the imparting of factual knowledge is not part of literary practice, he has already been answered. And if he claims that the truth or falsity of such factual claims is not relevant to the value or disvalue we place on novels, he has already been answered.

Literary fiction, since time out of mind, has been thought of as the educator of mankind. And there is no reason to believe that the novel, though a relatively newcomer, is not included in that thought and in that function. It is an indisputable fact that readers of novels gain factual information from their reading, although of course factual misinformation as well. That much of such factual information might be gained from other, deeper, more specialized, and more thorough sources is irrelevant. If that were grounds for dismissing novel-reading as a source of factual knowledge, then newspapers, magazines, and popular

information-providing books of all kinds would suffer a similar fate. As well, *all* sources of information are also sources of misinformation, not just novels. That is simply the human condition: the result of human fallibility *tout court*.

What more can be said? Probably a good deal more. But for now, I cannot think of what it might be.

NOTES

1. Berys Gaut, "The Ethical Criticism of Art," in *Philosophy of Literature: Contemporary and Classic Readings: An Anthology*, ed. Eileen John and Dominic McIver Lopes (Oxford: Blackwell, 2004), 360, reprinted from Jerrold Levinson, ed., *Aesthetics and Ethics: Essays at the Intersection* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998).
2. Quoted in G. B. Harrison, ed., *Shakespeare: The Complete Works* (New York: Harcourt, Brace, 1952), 1384, emphasis added.
3. Stacie Friend, "Fiction as Genre," *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society: New Series*, 112 (2012): 199.
4. Editor's note: Here and below in this chapter, I have replaced "factual communication" with "informational communication" to match the terminology in chapter 2. This is in line with Professor Kivy's reply to a review of his manuscript: "I think reviewer one is absolutely right that I should make the terminology in chapters two and three consistent. I will see to that in my revisions."
5. Editor's note: The "hypothesis proposal function" appears to involve what Professor Kivy referred to as "conversational communication" in the previous chapter.
6. See Peter Kivy, *Philosophies of Arts: An Essay in Differences* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), chap. 5; *The Performance of Reading: An Essay in the Philosophy of Literature* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2006), 100–11; and "On the Banality of Fictional Truths," *Philosophic Exchange* 28 (1997–1998).
7. William James, "The Will to Believe," in *Essays in Pragmatism*, ed. Albury Castell (New York: Hafner, 1951).
8. For my view on this, see Peter Kivy, *Once-Told Tales: An Essay in Literary Aesthetics* (Chichester: Wiley-Blackwell, 2011), chap. 1.

9. Thomas Nagel, “War and Massacre,” in *Consequentialism and Its Critics*, ed. Samuel Scheffler (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1988), 58.
10. Plato, *Republic*, trans. John Llewelyn Davies and David James Vaughan (London: Macmillan, 1950), 340 (599).
11. Ibid., 343 (600).
12. Ibid., 341 (599).
13. Editor’s note: Professor Kivy wrote “a ceteris paribus or conditional value”—I have changed that phrase to “a *pro tanto* value” in light of the remainder of the paragraph.
14. Amanda Foreman, *A World on Fire: Britain’s Crucial Role in the American Civil War* (New York: Random House, 2010), 27.
15. Ibid., 108, emphasis added.
16. Editor’s note: The story is almost certainly apocryphal. See Daniel R. Vollaro, “Lincoln, Stowe, and the ‘Little Woman/Great War’ Story: The Making, and Breaking, of a Great American Anecdote,” *Journal of the Abraham Lincoln Association* 30 (2009): 18–34, http://hdl.handle.net/2027/spo.2629860.0030.104.
17. Joseph Tartakovsky, “Dickens V. Lawyers,” *New York Times*, February 6, 2012, A23.
18. Nicholas Wolterstorff, “Why Philosophy of Art Cannot Handle Kissing, Touching, and Crying,” *Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* 61 (2003): 21.
19. Ibid.
20. Noël Carroll, “Art, Intention, and Conversation,” in *Intention and Interpretation*, ed. Gary Iseminger (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1992), 117.
21. Aristotle, *Poetics*, in Aristotle, *On Poetry and Style*, trans. G. M. A. Grube (Indianapolis: Bobbs-Merrill, 1958), 7 (1448b).
22. Ibid., 18 (1451b).
23. Ibid., 18–19 (1451b).
24. Plato, *Republic*, 353 (608), emphasis added.

Chapter 4

Knowledge and Novel Knowledge

I have written often and at times at length on the question of whether and how literature, particularly the novel, might impart knowledge to its readers, as a legitimate function *qua* literature, *qua* novel.[1] I have not changed my views on the matter so have nothing to recant. But I now have, shall we say, further views on the matter that tend to alter what emphasis I put on the various aspects of my previous views. So it seemed to me that a reexamination of the whole question is now in order.

And let me begin with the following observation. It appears to me that more philosophers than one would expect at this stage of the game are knee-jerk *essentialists*. Which is to say, the legacy of Plato and the "Socratic Project" still live on. The quest for necessary and sufficient conditions, arguments by Wittgenstein and others to the contrary notwithstanding, seems, among many philosophers, alive and well.

It is certainly no different in the philosophical subdiscipline of philosophy of art and aesthetics. Here, as elsewhere, knee-jerk essentialism is still alive and kicking. And in regard to the question at hand, the kick comes in different varieties: what I call *exclusionary essentialism*, *deflationary essentialism*, and *kind essentialism*.

Exclusionary essentialism is the view that literary artworks, novels in particular, have an essential nature that excludes the imparting of knowledge. What that essential nature might be is, of course, a subject of dispute.

Those who espouse *deflationary essentialism* do not deny that literary artworks, novels in particular, can convey knowledge of various kinds. But they deny that the acquiring of such knowledge from artworks such as novels, or the pleasure we take in acquiring it therefrom, is a legitimate part of the literary experience. In other words, the essential nature of literary artworks does not include the imparting of knowledge, *qua* literary artwork, according to the deflationary essentialist. She does, however, allow that literary artworks can impart knowledge. That,

however, is no more a part of their essential nature than the usefulness of a painting in covering a crack in my wall.

Finally, adherents to *kind essentialism* share what I believe to be the widespread intuition among the ordinary citizenry in the West, untainted by philosophy or critical theory, that many kinds of literary works, novels particularly, *of course* impart knowledge as part of their purpose and pleasure, *qua* artworks, *qua* novels. But being *essentialists* with regard to literary works, they insist that the *kind* of knowledge that literary works, and especially novels, impart is an essentially different kind of knowledge from that imparted by other, nonliterary sources. *Kind essentialism*, then, is the view that some literary works, including some novels, do impart knowledge as part of their role, *qua* literature, *qua* novels. But because *kind essentialists* are, like many other philosophers, knee-jerk essentialists, they must hold that the knowledge imparted is knowledge peculiar to those works and those works alone, or in that respect those works would not be essentially different from other sources of knowledge.

So having distinguished the three kinds of essentialism with regard to the knowledge-imparting capabilities of literary works, let me now lay my cards on the table. I am no kind of essentialist *at all* as regards the knowledge-imparting capabilities of literary works, novels in particular. They impart knowledge that is no different from the knowledge imparted by other sources.

This is not to say, first of all, that there are not different *kinds* of knowledge. And it is not to say, furthermore, that there are not different *ways* of imparting knowledge and acquiring knowledge. But that having been said, the point I am making is that narrative fiction imparts, *qua* narrative fiction, those kinds of knowledge, not some special kind of knowledge that only *it* can impart. And as well, narrative fiction conveys those kinds of knowledge that it does convey in ways—not *all* of the ways—no different from the ways other sources of knowledge convey it. That indeed is the major thesis of this chapter. And it is time now to elucidate and defend it.

KNOWLEDGE

I assume, to begin with, the distinction is valid between "knowing that" and "knowing how," although some philosophers, recently, have tried to collapse the latter into the former. And I assume that ordinary folks acquiesce in this distinction as well: that they recognize a difference between *knowing that* I have a flat tire and *knowing how* to fix a flat tire. So I will assume the distinction and say no more about it. Furthermore, I will assume that *knowing how* is an unproblematic concept that I and "ordinary folks," which is to say, nonphilosophers, share.

Knowing that, however, requires further comment. So I will briefly worry that concept now.

Let me begin by giving the reader some vague idea of what I will mean by "knowledge that" in the present essay, which I will simply call "knowledge" in what follows. For a vague idea is all I have. Needless to say—at least I hope it is needless to say—I am not in the business of *defining* "knowledge." That is the epistemologists' job, at least some epistemologists think, and a job not yet completed, if even possible, although it has been worked upon since before Socrates was born. So I will rely upon what I take to be an idea of what knowledge is that the man on the street, at least where I live, and the woman on the Clapham omnibus share, more or less.

For all of its well-known philosophical difficulties, I think, nevertheless, that "justified true belief" comes close to capturing the nonphilosopher's intuitive concept of knowledge. That is not to say that the nonphilosopher, when he or she hears the phrase, will have an "Ah ha!" experience and exclaim, "Yes. That is *exactly* what I meant by knowledge all along." Rather, I think the phrase has to be unpacked before the nonphilosopher will recognize that it captures his or her concept of knowledge, more or less.

But that being said, I do *not* intend to go through the laborious task of unpacking "justified true belief." That would be unnecessary for present purposes. Rather, I am assuming that my readers, except for those who might be Pyrrhonian skeptics or something of the sort, share with me an intuitive, commonsense concept of knowledge, something like "justified true belief," and the view that we sometimes possess it.

Now I am well aware of the notorious counterexamples to the concept of knowledge as justified true belief. And I am also familiar with

some of the empirical evidence to the effect that intuitions about putative examples of knowledge are not necessarily shared cross-culturally, for example, the intuitions of Asians as opposed to those of Westerners.

So let me add the following qualifications. First, I make no cross-cultural claims here. I am concerned exclusively with the western European (and American) literary tradition and those who write and read in that tradition.

Second, in spite of the well-known philosophical difficulties with the concept of knowledge, I am relying here upon the assumption that outside of the epistemology seminar room, we all have a pretty good idea of when we have and when we have not acquired knowledge from the usual sources that ordinary folks go to to acquire it and, as well, that we no doubt are frequently mistaken about whether we do indeed have knowledge or true belief. I am also relying on the assumption that we all —the "we" specified above—share the various informal methods whereby we try to substantiate the beliefs we acquire from the sources that ordinary folks acquire it.

What I now must do, I am afraid, is to carefully open a nasty can of worms and try to keep from being overwhelmed by the critters, which is to say, sort out some basic *kinds* of "knowing that" that I will be talking about in the rest of my chapter. I say I shall open a can of worms because, for one thing, I cannot hope to enumerate *every* kind of knowledge there might be. I present only a basic few.

But, finally, one further qualification of the concept of "knowledge I am using here must be entered. And it is this.

I want to weaken, so to say, the conditions on knowledge that it be belief that is justified and true. What I want to say is that the "knowledge" I am talking about here is what might better be termed "putative knowledge" and its "justification" rather "putative justification" as opposed to what I would not want to even call "putative knowledge" or "putative justification." Examples will help.

A man thinks long and hard on the matter, fashions arguments, adduces evidence, and comes to the conclusion that determinism (as he construes it) is true and there cannot be anything in the nature of free will (as he construes it). But of course whether determinism is true is a

perennial question in philosophy, as is the existence or nonexistence of free will. So the man in question may very well hold false beliefs and his "justification" not be "justification" at all; for how can it really be "justification," properly so called, if what it is supposed to "justify" might very well not be the case?

To drive the point home, let us compare what I am calling "putative knowledge" with belief that fails not only to be knowledge but putative knowledge as well. Here follow two examples.

A guy wakes up with the firm belief that "This is my lucky day." And he bets a large sum of money, that he can ill afford to lose, on black to win at the roulette table in the belief that black will turn up. He does not have putative knowledge because he does not have putative justification for his belief. (Had he come to believe, however, that black would come up on the basis of the gambler's fallacy, he would have putative knowledge because he had putative though invalid justification.)

A woman travels to Lourdes to take the waters, on the basis of "blind faith," in the firm belief that so doing will cure her cancer. She does not have putative knowledge because she does not have putative justification.

In what follows, I am going to defend the thesis, then, that some literary works, some novels in particular, are genuine sources of putative knowledge, *qua* literary works, *qua* novels. But I will drop the qualification "putative" from the discussion and will simply use the terms "knowledge" and "justification" throughout, with the understanding that, unless specifically stated, I mean by them "putative knowledge" and "putative justification" and, of course, that sometimes the knowledge is real and the justification valid.

Now, having given the reader some idea of what knowledge is, which I hope the reader shares, it is time to open that can of worms and distinguish among *kinds* of knowledge and some ways of acquiring them.

KINDS OF KNOWLEDGE

I begin with what I will call "self-justified knowledge." This is knowledge that the knower gains by himself working out the justification for his

belief or is led to his belief by his working out the evidence and arguments that lead to it.

The paradigm case of self-justified knowledge would, I suppose, be scientific discovery. There is, needless to say, self-justified knowledge in the humanistic disciplines and in ordinary life as well.

The second kind of knowledge I want to distinguish is what I will call "other-justified knowledge." Thus, for example, if an individual reads in a history book that such and such happened at such and such a time and place and the author provides her with the evidence and inferences that have led him to the conclusion that such and such happened at such and such a time and place, she has acquired the belief that such and such happened at such and such time and place and acquired as well justification for that belief. But she did not work out the justification herself. It was worked out for her (or anyone else who might read the book), hence "other-justified knowledge."

Next there is what I will call "authority-based knowledge." Thus, I *know* that I have a stomach ulcer because my physician tells me so. And I *know* that my car has a faulty brake cylinder because my auto mechanic tells me so. They do not, nor need they, give me the justification, so I claim, for these beliefs for these beliefs to count as knowledge.

And, finally, there is what I call "testimonial knowledge," an example of which might be *knowing* that my friend Felix is in Chicago for the weekend because his wife told me so. Nor, I think, do I require from her evidence that Felix is indeed in Chicago for the weekend. Her telling me is all the justification I need.

Now both authority-based knowledge and testimonial knowledge depend, of course, on the authority of some source. The physician and auto mechanic are certified experts who function in an institutional setting that justifies my taking their word for it, without requiring evidence or justification or proof. Their diplomas and licenses are on the wall, whether real or implied (and more of that anon).

But what of Felix's wife? It would be odd to call her an expert or authority on Felix. Nevertheless, I think we are justified in saying "I know, I am justified in believing" that Felix is spending the weekend in Chicago on the testimony of his wife. And perhaps what we want to say here is that Felix's wife is well placed to know the whereabouts of Felix and,

therefore, a reliable source of information about that and has no reason to lie.

I dare say there are more kinds of knowledge than the above. But these will serve my purpose. So I will now close the can of worms before any more of the pesky fellows escape and overrun my argument.

I have enumerated some kinds of knowing. I go on now to some *ways* of knowing—another can of worms to be *cautiously* opened. This will lead, of course, to the object of the exercise, namely, literary works of art, novels in particular.

WAYS OF KNOWING

Surely the most common way of knowing is through sense perception. But we are concerned here with coming to know through our experiencing of literary works of art, novels in particular, which are in the form of *texts*. And it would be a poor joke indeed to maintain that since we have to see the words of a text, if we read it, or touch the words, if it is in Braille, or hear the words, if it is read to us or recited in a play, the knowledge we may gain from literary texts, novels in particular, is *perceptual* knowledge. So, obviously, we can put that absurdity aside straightaway. The way or ways literary artworks, novels in particular, convey knowledge must be in the way or ways that *texts* do. Our quarry, then, is the way or ways that texts convey knowledge.

But knowledge to *whom*? My interest is not in how experts gain knowledge from texts: college professors, scientists, physicians, and so forth. It is how ordinary people, in all walks of life, do, as I am interested in how "ordinary people" experience literary works, novels in particular.

By "ordinary people," however, I do not necessarily mean only the *lumpenproletariat* but they as well. I mean anyone, with any level of education and culture, with any level of expertise, who reads a literary work, a novel in particular, with understanding, in the way it was intended to be read, as a work of literary art, offering the rewards that a literary work of art, a novel in particular, was created to offer. And I first want to inquire how these "ordinary people" acquire knowledge.

The first thing to be noted, *ab initio*, is that all of the ordinary people I am concerned with have of course acquired beliefs from their

parents and from their teachers, at whatever level of schooling they have achieved. And, needless to say, many of these beliefs do not constitute knowledge, as I have characterized it, although some may do, and many of them as well are undoubtedly false. My interest in them begins when they have, so to say, reached the age of maturity and independence, in other words, when they have put behind them the tutelage of parents and teachers and embarked upon their various lives and professions.

What are the ways such as these continue to acquire beliefs, so justified, one assumes? *One* of the ways, I shall argue, is through reading novels. And furthermore, I shall argue that acquiring knowledge from novels or acquiring beliefs from novels and subsequently confirming or disconfirming them are all three of a kind, or kinds, as those owed to other familiar sources. So let us begin with some familiar and, I assume, uncontroversial sources of knowledge for "ordinary people," among whom I include myself and my ilk, when we are not seeking knowledge in our academic disciplines and specialties.

Consider, then, "just plain Bill," or "Bill" for short. Bill, like most of us, takes a morning paper. And again, like most of us, he gets a lot of his information from it about what's going on in the world beyond the boundaries of his neighborhood and workplace. Is it knowledge? Is he justified in believing it?

Bill is well aware, as are we all, of the old adage: "Don't believe everything you read in the papers." And a healthy dollop of skepticism is well advised in this regard. But surely, it would be ill-advised to go to the skeptical extreme and adopt the precept: "Don't believe *anything* you read in the papers." The precept, I presume, that we all, at least implicitly, follow is: "Believe what you read in the papers unless there is some palpable reason *not* to." Obviously, one would be ill-advised to believe *anything* one read in a newspaper edited by Dr. Goebbels.

My conclusion, then, is that the beliefs about matters of fact one acquires from newspapers are justified and for the most part constitute what the folk would (rightly) take to be knowledge. They are justified because journalism is part of an infrastructure of which the validation of expertise is a part. Journalists are trained to report facts in their purview,

as are physicians in their purview, popular historians in theirs, and so on. And all of these are sources of justified belief for Bill and his ilk.

Of course, the beliefs so acquired, justified though they may be, may not, in the event, turn out to be true and hence may fail to be knowledge. For the way I am construing "justified," a belief is justified if the best evidence available at the time seems conclusive. But, as we know from many examples, what seems conclusive evidence for a belief may, at the end of the day, turn out not to be so, and the belief may be indeed false.

I am alluding here not just to scientific inquiry but also to the beliefs acquired by Bill in the ways I have described above, which are the object of my interest in these pages. All of these beliefs are of course defeasible. They are frequently merely justified by testimony and authority. And further experience may prove the testimony flawed or the authority mistaken. Authorities, needless to say, can be mistaken without losing their status as authorities. And testimony, in the event, can be either honestly or dishonestly off the mark, compromised in some respect or another.

So Bill may read in Sunday's paper a retraction of something reported in Saturday's. Or he may read a more recent biography of Lincoln that disproves beliefs he has long held on the basis of reading an earlier one whose author lacked the evidence that has now come to light. And so on, and so on, and so on.

Thus, newspapers and the media, histories and biographies, magazines, and so forth all constitute what I have described above as an informal institutional infrastructure of knowledge sources and belief testing. And what I now want to claim is that fictional narrative in general, the novel in particular, since its appearance on the scene, is part of this institutional infrastructure of knowledge sources and belief testing and has been since time out of mind. To that claim I now turn my attention.

NOVEL KNOWLEDGE

So let us return to just plain Bill. He reads the morning paper, popular historical nonfiction, and an occasional popular biography. And he

acquires knowledge from all of these sources, as we have seen, as well as, unfortunately, false beliefs into the bargain.

But like millions of others of his ilk, Bill enjoys novel-reading too. For example, part of his summer reading included W. Somerset Maugham's *Cakes and Ale*, which he borrowed from his local public library, as well as an early novel of Nevil Shute's called *Stephen Morris* and Liam O'Flaherty's masterpiece, *Famine*, which he purchased in paperback at a secondhand book sale. From the first, he gained a good deal of knowledge about English mores, customs, social stratification, and other such matters during the period in which the story takes place, part of the period, let me add, during which Maugham lived and wrote. From *Stephen Morris*, he came away with a good deal of knowledge about early aviation after World War I, a subject in which, as readers of Nevil Shute's novels will know, the author was very well versed. And finally, from O'Flaherty's great work, he gained detailed and harrowing acquaintance with the facts of the great Irish famine of the 1840s.

But wait a bit, my skeptical reader may object. It is one thing to claim that Bill acquires knowledge of the world from newspapers, popular histories, and biographies and quite another to claim that he acquires knowledge of the world from *novels*. Novels are, after all, *fiction*. And fiction is *made up*. That's what it *means* to *be* fiction. So of course you cannot acquire knowledge from *fiction*. It is all a figment of the novelist's *imagination*, not a product of his or her knowledge of the world: of "matters of fact."

However, we make reply to the skeptic in this wise. Yes, of course, *some* things are made up in fiction: the plot, most of the characters, many of the settings, no doubt, and so forth. There was no Stephen Morris, no Helen Riley, no Rowdon Aircraft Company Limited. O'Flaherty's great heroine, Mary Kilmartin, never existed. And the events in these novels never transpired. All are products of the novelists' fertile imaginations.

However, Shute's representation of the state of aviation in its pioneer days after World War I, the trials and tribulations of those who designed, flew, and tried to sell those early aircraft, is surely accurate and *not* woven out of whole cloth, nor were the facts of the Irish famine

that form the framework of O'Flaherty's *Famine*. Obviously, the experienced reader of novels can tell the fact from the fiction.

Not so fast, though! The skeptic may have another string to her bow. For remember, she will chide, I claimed that Bill acquired beliefs from newspapers, biographies, magazines, histories, his accountant, and his physician because they all were part of, constituted, what I characterized as the knowledge-justification infrastructure. And this bestowed upon these sources an authority, as it were, a license to practice that assured their reliability, although not, of course, their infallibility, as purveyors of justified belief and, one hopes, *knowledge*, at least some of the time. They are institutionally certified as reliable truth-tellers, *ceteris paribus*.

Such, however, is *not* the case with writers of fiction, so our skeptic continues. Their job is to tell a story. Why should we take them to be authorities on anything but how to do *that*? They are not part of the knowledge-justification infrastructure I have described above as are the others named: journalists, biographers, historians, physicians, and the like. Thus, they have no knowledge-imparting credentials, and we have no reason to think them trustworthy or authorities, even when they represent what are ostensibly "facts" about the world.

The skeptic's rant has to it a certain *prima facie* plausibility. But, as I shall now proceed to argue, it is, in fact, totally in the wrong. The narrator of fiction has been a *bona fide* player in the knowing game since the get-go, at least as far as the Western tradition is concerned, and that is the only tradition I make any claims about. I go on, now, to try to substantiate that claim.

AUTHORIAL AUTHORITY

As paradoxical as it may seem, I begin my defense of the author of fiction as a source of knowledge, with Plato. It is seemingly paradoxical of course because Plato is the most distinguished and most extreme debunker in the Western philosophical tradition of fictional narrative as a source of knowledge.

Be that as it may, Plato attests to the fact that fictional narrative was taken by his contemporaries *to be* a source of knowledge. As he

complained, the citizenry believed "that good poets do really know the subjects about which they seem to the multitude to speak well."[2]

Now the first conclusion to be drawn from this statement of Plato's—and the conclusion most relevant to our concerns here—is that as far back as classical antiquity, narrative and dramatic fiction were taken by the "folk" to be sources of knowledge. Thus, the skeptic's worry that authors of fiction are not part of what I have called the knowledge-justification infrastructure receives a heavy blow from the fact, attested to by Plato, that, on the contrary, they were already part of it in Plato's lifetime. And from then until now, there is, I need hardly argue, an unbroken tradition to that effect, some dissenters to the contrary notwithstanding. The idea of the poet, playwright, and, more recently, the novelist as sources of knowledge and wisdom has endured among the folk from before Plato to the present moment.

Of course, the rest of Plato's discussion in the *Republic*, in this regard, is a diatribe *against* the folk taking literary fiction as a source of knowledge. His charge is that they *shouldn't*. But his argument, as many of my readers will know, is based on a concept of "knowledge" that few of my readers, if any, indeed, would endorse or the metaphysics that goes with it.

That the poets do not acquaint us with the forms was Plato's problem, not ours. For what I am construing here as knowledge is knowledge in the sense in which ordinary folk in our culture take it to be. And it is *that* knowledge that, I claim, we have every reason to think we can trust some authors of fiction to impart some of the time. They are card-carrying members of the knowledge-justification infrastructure, although, needless to say, some of them are more worthy of our trust than others.

So why should I trust Somerset Maugham to be giving me an accurate idea of English manners and customs and social relations in the period in which *Cakes and Ale* is represented as taking place? Why should I, likewise, trust Nevil Shute to be giving me an accurate idea of the problems and vicissitudes of early aviation in the period in which the plot of *Stephen Morris* is represented as taking place? And why should I trust Liam O'Flaherty to be portraying the Irish famine as it actually was?

The answer, of course, that I am developing is that writers of fiction are a part of what I have been calling the knowledge-justification infrastructure, as are journalists, biographers, "experts," and writers of popular nonfiction. But that answer turns out to be too facile and needs some fine-tuning.

For, after all, consider the case of a reader whom I shall call naive Norma, or Norma for short, who reads Tolkien's *Lord of the Rings* and comes away with a whole array of beliefs about hobbits and Middle Earth that she takes for *knowledge*. And when asked by the skeptic for her justification for entertaining such seemingly fantastic beliefs, she replies that Tolkien, like other distinguished writers of fiction whose novels she has read, Shute, Maugham, O'Flaherty, and the rest, is surely part of the knowledge-justification infrastructure and so one of the wise men and women worthy of her trust and belief.

Our answer to Norma, and to the skeptic who might cite her and her ilk as a *reductio* of the position I am developing here, is not far to seek. For I take it as received opinion, established doctrine, that in order to interpret and appreciate *correctly* a work of art, in this case a novel, one must know to what *genre* it belongs. And Norma, clearly, does not know that, having read *Lord of the Rings* as belonging to the genre (let us say) "realistic novel" rather than "fantasy" (or whatever).

That, by the way, is *not* to say we cannot derive knowledge, properly so called, from fantasy works such as *Lord of the Rings*, merely not the *kind* of knowledge naive Norma thought she was deriving from it. As a matter of fact, I seem to recall that one commentator on the novel took it to be an allegory of some kind (which, by the way, Tolkien vigorously denied), having much to teach us about "human nature." Whether or not *The Lord of the Rings* is an allegory is not the point, the point being that works of fantasy and other genres of nonrealistic fiction *can* be allegorical and thus *can*, through allegory (or other literary techniques, such as irony), be sources of knowledge properly so called—and that because their authors are part of the knowledge-justification infrastructure, as I have been arguing above.

But a further question faces us still, namely, whether the acquiring of knowledge from narrative fiction, particularly the novel, as described above, is a legitimate part of the artistic experience, *qua* artistic

experience: whether it is a legitimate part of a novel's purpose, *qua* novel, *qua* literary *artwork*, to convey such knowledge. This is a deep question. I will, however, have little to say about it here because I have dealt with it at some length elsewhere.[3]

What I will say is simply this. Throughout the Western literary tradition, from Plato to the present, ordinary folks have taken pleasure in and valued acquiring knowledge from fiction and have, so far as I can make out, assumed that that was a normal, legitimate part of why they were experiencing fiction as fiction, if they thought about the matter at all. It is, it seems to me, the burden of proof on philosophy to show them mistaken.

But that having been said, I now want, in the concluding section of my chapter, to execute a kind of about-face and argue that the acquiring of knowledge from fiction, which we have every good reason to do and enjoy, is far outweighed by another and much higher function of narrative fiction. In a word, *the story's the thing*.

FICTION OVER FACT

I will cut to the chase. I have been using as one of my examples of a novel from which a good deal of knowledge can be acquired: Nevil Shute's *Stephen Morris*. Shute was no great novelist: no Charles Dickens or Jane Austen or Liam O'Flaherty (whom I will get to in a moment). But he was a very popular writer in his day, and some of his novels became movies of note. Nor do I have any compunction about using as an example, in my role as philosopher of art, a work of art that is *not* a work of high art. What the "folk" read is surely worthy of the philosopher's attention too.

In any event, I want to quote here part of the "blurb" on the back cover of Shute's *Stephen Morris* that is meant to entice the reader into *buying* the book. "*Stephen Morris* and *Pilotage* are the linked novellas of the pioneer days of flying. . . . [T]hey reflect strongly personal elements of the thrilling and eloquent style of writing that has made him one of the world's best-loved story-tellers."[4]

Or, to go from the popular novel to the literary masterpiece, let me now quote from the blurb on the back cover of O'Flaherty's *Famine*. Like

Stephen Morris, we are told what the novel is about. But the clincher is this: “The author’s skill as a storyteller is at times breathtaking. This is a most rewarding novel.”[5]

What’s the point? Well, the point is this. The prospective buyer is told what the book is *about*. But surely, that is not going to tip the scales. How many readers out there are going to read a novel *just* because they can learn from it about the early history of aviation or the Irish famine?

The *climax* of the blurb, if I may so put it, in each case, is to assure the prospective buyer that *the book tells a whopping good tale*. It’s a page-turner. It’s by “one of the world’s best-loved *story-tellers*.” “The author’s skill as a *storyteller* is at times breathtaking.”

You cannot sell a novel by assuring the prospective buyer that she will learn a lot about aviation or whales or pride and prejudice or the Irish famine unless you can assure her that she will learn all of that by being told a good story.

Since the demise of formalism—indeed one of the causes of its demise—philosophers of art have put up a stout defense of the thesis that literary fiction, novels in particular, are a genuine source of knowledge. I have just put up such a defense, I hope a convincing one, here and elsewhere. And I am not recanting. But I am *retrenching*.

It is natural enough, quite understandable, that philosophers should be sucked in by the knowledge thing. If it’s worthwhile, it must be because it is knowledge producing. Literary fiction is worthwhile. And the next, almost inevitable step is to “explain” our deep need for and pleasure in being told a story as due to our deeper, more basic (and more praiseworthy) need for and pleasure in knowledge acquisition. The step is as old as philosophy itself in the West, as old in fact as Aristotle’s explanation for our pleasure in representation: “the cause of this is, that to learn gives the liveliest pleasure, not only to philosophers but to men in general.”[6]

But it is a false step and should not be taken, tempting as it is for philosophers of art to take it. Some fiction gives knowledge: that is part of its legitimate artistic charm. But it *is* only a *part* of its charm—and a *small* part at that, so I am arguing.

The overriding charm of fiction is in the story. And to explain the story's charm, the story's hold over us, it appears to me, should be the overriding project of the philosophy of literature.

I have argued here that in a perfectly commonsensical and commonly accepted meaning of the word, but not by any means the *only* meaning, we gain "knowledge" from literary fiction, the novel in particular. Furthermore, I have argued that the acquiring of such knowledge produces a legitimate part of the pleasure we take in the experience of literary fiction. But for all of its importance, it is but the tip of the iceberg. The story is the rest. And that remains, as I write, in the depths and out of sight. It is the rest of the iceberg that we must bring to the surface and try to comprehend.

NOTES

1. Editor's note: The original title of the chapter included the subtitle "*Quelle Difference?*"
2. Plato, *The Republic of Plato*, trans. John Llewelyn Davies and David James Vaughan (London: Macmillan, 1950), 340 (599).
3. On this, see chapter 3.
4. Nevil Shute, *Stephen Morris* (London: Meridian Paperbacks, 1990), back cover.
5. Liam O'Flaherty, *Famine* (Dublin: Wolfhound Press, 1984), back cover.
6. Aristotle, *Poetics*, trans. S. H. Butcher, in *Aristotle's Theory of Poetry and Fine Art*, 4th ed., ed. S. H. Butcher (New York: Dover, 1951), 15 (IV).

Chapter 5
Swept Up in the Story

> For now we see through a glass darkly;
> but then face to face.—1 Corinthians 13:12

In his recent, impressive new book *Art Rethought*, Nicholas Wolterstorff raises the, as far as I know, seldom-raised question, "Why have philosophers of art of the modern period often presented as universal what is true only of particular forms of art and particular ways of engaging art?" And his answer, which he had already proposed in an earlier book, *Art in Action*, is "that philosophers of the modern have typically had their eye on what I called [in *Art in Action*] our *modern institution of high art*."[1]

In *Art Rethought*, Wolterstorff is concerned principally with adducing arts other than the high arts—venerative art, memorial art, and work songs, for example—and with distinguishing the various *different* ways we engage these arts from the *one* way modern philosophers of art have tended to characterize the way in which we engage *high art*, namely, the way Wolterstorff refers to as the *attitude of disinterested attention*.

In the spirit of Wolterstorff's concern, in *Art Rethought*, I would like here to broach a related issue, namely, how a *different* kind of person from those who customarily engage in and *write about* their engagement in *high art* engages in the *very same* high art. Furthermore, the different kind of person I have in mind is what I shall call the "ordinary reader," and the high art I have in mind is literary fiction, in particular, the novel.

Two things will have to be made clear, however, before I get down to business, namely, what I mean by the "ordinary reader" and what I mean by *literary* fiction. So to these matters I now turn my attention.

THE ORDINARY READER

To call someone "ordinary" sounds very much like a put-down. But I by no means intend any such thing.

So let me begin with the mundane observation that the *New York Times* prints in its "Book Review" section what it calls a best-sellers list, divided into fiction and nonfiction, the category of fiction consisting almost entirely of novels. The best-sellers list does not tell you how many copies of each novel have been sold to date, only how many weeks a book has been on the list. However, just to get an idea of the orders of magnitude involved, I have before me an advertisement in the "Book Review" section of the *Times* for a novel by Marcus Shakey that is *not* on the best-seller list. It boasts, "Over Half a Million Copies Sold."

Now I assert, with full confidence, that of these over half a million purchasers, the percentage of them who are professors of English literature, philosophers of art, and the like is so minuscule as to be completely insignificant in these half a million sales. What puts a novel on the best-seller list or boosts its sale to half a million copies is the legion of what I am calling "ordinary readers." And the present essay in the philosophy of literature is an essay in ordinary reader aesthetics, if you will, which is, I believe, as worthy a subject for the philosophy of literature as the kind of nonordinary reader who, without acknowledging or even perhaps realizing it, philosophers of art concern themselves with exclusively.

Let me begin by trying to convey the idea of what I mean by the "ordinary reader." In brief, ordinary readers are folk in all walks of life who read novels for pleasure, as part of their enjoyment of their leisure time. They may be dentists or doctors, lawyers or accountants, stock brokers or others in business, or shopkeepers or housewives, not to mention those in the trades. They are, in short, "us." It is "we" who buy half a million copies of a novel, not the professors of English literature or philosophers of art.

But why do we buy and read them? I will begin to answer that question by asking you to believe that I have just pulled from my bookshelves, at random, seven novels. I really have. (Well, two of them, actually are nonfiction: a Holocaust memoir and a history of the famous shipwreck that inspired *Moby Dick*.)

The books are all paperbacks, and like most such, they each have on the back cover an advertising "blurb" enticing the prospective reader to

buy the book. Each blurb of course tells what the book is *about*. But the climax (and, most of the time, literally, "the bottom line") is as follows:

- Ruth Park, *The Harp of the South*: "Ruth Park is a classic storyteller."
- Liam O'Flaherty, *Famine*: "The author's skill as a storyteller is at times breathtaking."
- Edith Ham Beer, *The Nazi Officer's Wife*: "A remarkable story."
- Yann Martel, *The Life of Pi*: "A story to make you believe in the soul-sustaining power of fiction."
- Colm Toibin, *Brooklyn*: "A classic coming-of-age story . . ."
- Nathanial Philbrick, *The Heart of the Sea*: "One of our country's great adventure stories."
- Jamie Y. Lee, *The Piano Teacher*: "Lee unfolds the story with the brisk grace and dissection of the society she describes. . . . [H]er novel is impossible to put down."

The *story*. The *story*. The *story*. The *story*. The *story*. The *story*. The *story*. Impossible to put down!

Novels, in short, sell a million copies not because a million people want to know about what it was like in Victorian England or the facts of "human nature" or to see how some moral dilemma might be resolved. They sell a million copies because a million people out there *want to be told a story* almost as much as they want to breathe. It is those people's novel-reading experience that I want my philosophy of literature to be the philosophy of in the present chapter.

LITERATURE

The novel is a genre of the more general category *literature*. This may appear a truism. But it is not. And here is why.

Let me begin to explain what I mean with a trivial observation. If one enters one of the few remaining bookstores in one's city or town, one will find that it will be divided into the following sections. Of course, there will be, to begin with, a broad division between the shelves marked "fiction" and those marked "nonfiction," as well, no doubt, the

shelves designated “poetry,” even though, of course, some poetry is fiction. And the shelves of nonfiction will be subdivided into “history,” “biography,” as well as, perhaps, “true crime” and so forth. But we are concerned here with the shelves marked “fiction.” So let us get on to those.

Some bookstores, depending upon their size and orientation, will have *all* of the fiction lumped together: Dickens and Jane Austen cheek by jowl with detective stories and all manner of novels of lesser quality. But many bookstores, particularly the larger ones, may have a separate section of shelves in the fiction section designated “classics,” where Dickens, Austen, and the like will be located. And this is a point of some importance to my argument here.

To introduce the point, consider someone who has just picked up a copy of Dashiell Hammett’s *The Maltese Falcon*, sees that it is a detective yarn, but knows nothing more about it or its author. He says to his friend, “I think I’ll buy this. I’m in the mood for a detective story.” His friend replies, “What you have in your hand isn’t just a detective story. It’s *literature*, for God’s sake. Hammett was a fine writer.”

Well *of course* it’s literature. It’s in the literature section: it’s a *novel*. What else could it be? A snake is a reptile!

But compare this case with a colloquy that occurs in the movie *The Philadelphia Story*. The Katherine Hepburn character is in the library reading a collection of short stories by the James Stewart character, to whom she remarks, as he happens by, “Why these are sheer *poetry*.” But just as it is trivially true that *The Maltese Falcon* is *literature*, it is patently *false* that the short stories are *poetry*. They are manifestly, literally, *prose*. A snake is *not* a mammal.

So what is going on here? Many of my readers, I imagine, will know, particularly those familiar with what R. G. Collingwood called in *The Principles of Art* “courtesy meanings.” Thus, “words in a living language are never used without some . . . emotional colouring, which sometimes takes precedence over its descriptive function. . . . But when the descriptive motive is overshadowed by the emotional one, the word becomes a courtesy title or discourtesy title as the case may be.”[2]

So in saying that *The Maltese Falcon* isn't just a detective yarn but "literature," one is imparting to it the courtesy title of the term: one is, in effect, paying it a compliment, not describing it. And likewise, in saying that a collection of short stories is "sheer poetry," one is, in effect, imparting to it the courtesy title of the term: one is, in effect, paying it a compliment, not describing it. Furthermore, interestingly enough, one is, in the first case, also correctly *describing* it and in the second case is not, at least as I am using the term "literature." *The Maltese Falcon* literally *is* literature, whereas the short-story collection is *not* poetry in the literal sense but prose. And that brings us to the important point of this exercise.

When I use the term "literature" in the present chapter, I will be using it in its strictly descriptive sense. I will not be paying any compliment here to what I will call "literature." In short, as I use the term "literature," the shoddiest whodunit is literature, as are *Great Expectations* and *Emma*. With that settled, I go on to related matters.

READING OPACITY

In his intriguing and insightful new book, Peter Lamarque, arguably the preeminent philosopher of literature in the field at the present time, invokes in its title, *The Opacity of Narrative*, an obviously *visual* metaphor for the experience of reading *literary* fiction and for the nature of *literary* fiction itself.

Lamarque writes, "A prominent feature of literary fictional narratives, I shall argue, is their *opacity*." And he continues the thought: "Rather than supposing that narrative descriptions are a window through which an independently existing (fictional) world is observed, . . . we must accept that there is no such transparent glass—only an opaque glass, painted, as it were, with figures seen not *through* it but *in* it."[3]

What is particularly significant for my purposes here is that the opacity model of literary fiction, if I may so characterize it, appears to make necessary or optimal or at least standard a particular *way* of reading literary fiction. As Lamarque puts it in one place, "When we know that a narrative is a work of fictional literature, we know that

attention to its formal structure is especially appropriate and potentially rewarding."[4] Or again, "the fictive stance involves the foregrounding of the formal features of narrative."[5] And one more time, not to belabor the point, Lamarque writes of the novel, *The Killer Angels*, a fictional account of the battle of Gettysburg: "To appreciate the novel, attention to its structure is all important"[6]

What I want to be noticed, straightaway, in the above quotations, to begin with, is the emphasis upon *structure*. In the first, what Lamarque singles out for importance in a work of literary fiction is "formal structure," in the second "formal features," and in the third "structure" *simpliciter*.

Furthermore, and most important for my purposes, Lamarque is not merely making the point that structure is important and present in literary fiction. He is making plain that it is to be *noticed*: we are to be acutely aware of it. In reading a work of literary fiction, "*attention* to its formal structure is especially appropriate and potentially rewarding." In reading a work of literary fiction, we should be *foregrounding* . . . the formal features of the narrative." And finally, "To appreciate the novel *attention* to its structure is all important."

Given this, we must now try to determine in light of it *how*, on Lamarque's view, a novel would be read. What would the performance of reading it be like?

Needless to say, like any other "normal" reader of a novel, Lamarque's reader, whom for obvious reasons I shall call the "structural reader," will be reading and following the story. But she will, in doing so, be concentrating a large portion of her attention on how the novel is *structured*. She will be concentrating, in other words, on the *medium*. And the medium is *opaque*. Recall Lamarque's analogy. She is not seeing the story through a transparent window. She is seeing, as it were, a window *on which* the story is etched. A stained-glass window is Lamarque's analogy.

Now let me emphasize, to begin with, that such a reader is a perfectly *authentic* reader. She is reading novels in a perfectly canonical way in which novels are meant to be read. But what I want to claim, pace Lamarque, is that it is not *the* way to read novels. Nor is it in some

sense the *optimal* way to read them. Most important for my argument, furthermore, it is not the way ordinary readers read novels. And if structural readers were the only readers of novels, no novel would sell a million copies. It would, I suggest, sell as many copies as the average printing of a university press.

The crux of the matter, for me, is *opacity*. For, obviously, it is the metaphor of opacity—the "opacity" of literary fiction—that suggests that the reader of literary fiction *must* be a *structural reader*. So to meet this challenge to the notion of the "ordinary reader," I want to begin by worrying a bit the notion of "opacity." For it would seem that if all literary fiction is, indeed, opaque, then no "ordinary reader" can be a "proper," *authentic* reader, or else there is no such person as an "ordinary reader" at all.

OPACITY AND TRANSPARENCY

In 1 Corinthians 13:12, Paul famously wrote, "For now we see through a glass, darkly; but then face to face."

In my appalling ignorance, I had thought, until quite recently, that Paul's "glass" through which we see "darkly" was a window, clouded or dirty, and thus obscuring what lay behind it.

But what Paul meant by a "glass" was a "looking glass," which is to say, a *mirror*! And what is surprising to me, and I think should be, is that perceiving something in a mirror should imply, *ipso facto*, perceiving it "darkly," not clearly and directly. For surely *we* do not think of mirrors as somehow distorting what they reflect or presenting it indirectly. Or, to put it another and highly relevant way, mirrors are not opaque to us. However, they apparently were for St. Paul and his contemporaries.

Another example might be instructive here. The invention and use of the microscope and telescope were, of course, monumental events in the scientific revolution. As Ofer Gal and Raz Chen-Morris put it in their fascinating study *Baroque Science*, "The empiricism of the New Science was not merely a philosophical position; it comprised techniques and capacities the ambition and accuracy of which were hardly imaginable before. Their hallmarks were the microscope and telescope, which produced the marvelous spectacle of the very far and the very small.

But," they continue, "this empirical prowess came at an unexpected price and with unexpected results." The price and results were that, as these new instruments were first experienced, they "did not offer direct observation at all; rather than extending and improving the senses, they were aimed at replacing them altogether." In other words, "Fundamentally mediated and brazenly man-made [by the optical instruments], the knowledge provided by the New Science, with all its marvelous success, could no longer lay claim to *direct acquaintance* with the objects of nature."[7]

So the moral of this story is that the first to look through the microscope and telescope experienced it as seeing through a glass darkly. The medium was opaque. But surely time has healed all of that. When we look through an optical microscope or optical or reflecting telescope, our experience is of seeing the world directly and unmediated. Time has erased opacity.

Does time, however, always go in that direction—that is, from opacity to transparency? By no means! Thus, in *The Transfiguration of the Commonplace*, Arthur Danto points out "that ways of seeing are perhaps transparent to those whose ways of seeing they are, and these may turn, so to speak, opaque when they no longer *are* their ways of seeing." He adds, "The history of art is filled with such examples," and adduces Giotto as a case in point, whose contemporaries, he opines, would have been "astounded at the realism of his paintings," whereas now "Giotto's mode of vision has become a kind of cultural artifact, which anyone can learn to identify."[8] In short, time has transformed Giotto from transparent to opaque.

Having now begun to get a handle on the image of "opacity," I want to turn to the opacity—or at least the supposed opacity—of narrative literary fiction. Lamarque, in one place, with regard to literature, puts the point with extreme bluntness and brevity. He states, without qualification, "We read for opacity."[9] Who is this "we"?

It seems clear to me that this "we" to whom Lamarque refers is but a minuscule percentage of, for example, the forty million—*forty million*!—said to have read Harper Lee's *To Kill a Mockingbird* or the half a million readers, to now, of Marcus Shakey's novel mentioned previously.

It is the “we” of structural readers—needless to say, not an unworthy “we.”

But what of the rest? What of those millions of readers who put novels on the *New York Times* best-seller list? Are they not worthy of philosophical scrutiny? Are they “improper” readers? No, no, and no!

What I want to argue, quite simply, is that most of the “we” who read novels and have kept the novel alive are not the “structural readers” whom Lamarque so acutely characterizes but the “ordinary readers” to whom the novel is not opaque but, to the contrary, *transparent*. That claim, of course, requires expansion and qualification, to both of which I now turn my attention.

TIME, TEXT, AND TRANSPARENCY

In my previous discussion of the opaque versus the transparent, I adduced cases in which the passage of time rendered the opaque transparent and the transparent opaque. Are there such cases in the literary realm? In particular, are there such cases in the realm of literary narrative? Indeed there are, and these are highly relevant to present concerns. Examples will help.

I have on my shelves a beautifully bound old three-volume set of *The Works of Virgil*, translated into English by John Dryden in rhymed couplets. I quote below the familiar opening of *The Aeneid* in Dryden’s translation:

> Arms and the man I sing, who forc’d by Fate,
> And haughty Juno’s hate,
> Expell’d and exil’d, left the Trojan shore.
> Long labours, both by sea and land, he bore,
> And in the doubtful war, before he won
> The Latin realm, and built the destin’d town;
> His banish’d gods restor’d to rites divine,
> And settled sure succession in his line,
> From when the race of Alban fathers come,
> And the long glories of majestic Rome.[10]

Rhymed couplets were a—perhaps *the*—standard mode of *poetic* expression in the Restoration and eighteenth century, Dryden and Pope, of course, the preeminent practitioners of the art. It was quite natural,

then, for Dryden to translate Virgil's *Aeneid* into rhymed couplets, even though the original Latin was not rhymed because it was a *poem*, and the most expedient way of preserving its *poetic* character, in English translation, during Dryden's floruit would be to render it in rhyme as well as (of course) to preserve its iambic rhythm.

And to drive home my point, compare Dryden's translation with a modern one, *in verse*, by Rolfe Humphries, *unrhymed*, as was the original:

> Arms and the man I sing, the first who came
> Compelled by fate, an exile out of Troy,
> To Italy and the Lavinian Coast,
> Much buffeted on land and on the deep
> By violence of the gods, through that long rage,
> That lasting hate, of Juno's. And he suffered
> Much, also, in war, till he should build his town
> And bring his gods to Latium, whence, in time,
> The Latin race, the Alban fathers, rose
> And the great walls of everlasting Rome.[11]

Which of the two would Dryden's audience have found more "poetic," the absence of rhyme in the original notwithstanding, and therefore more accurate?

My point is this. There is a direct analogy to be drawn, it appears to me, between the translation, in rhymed couplets, of the *Aeneid* and Danto's example of Giotto's pictorial representations. The analogue, in a nutshell, is that in both cases, time has turned the transparent medium of representation opaque. In the case of Dryden's translation, our concern here, what I am claiming is that rhymed couplets were a common, "natural" mode of fictional narrative during the Restoration and eighteenth century. The reader would, of course, be "aware" of the rhyming but not, so to say, "transfixed" by it. Whereas the modern reader, to the contrary, *is* transfixed by it: it is in her face; she is acutely, consciously aware of it. And you can verify what I am claiming by yourself trying to read Dryden's translation. Whatever other experiences of it, whether positive or negative, that you may have, I predict that you will be acutely aware of the rhyming, perhaps to the point of impatience or tedium, perhaps aesthetic satisfaction. But you will *not* be swept up in the story. And *that* is my major point.

But let us turn now to our major concern, the novel, which is the form of narrative fiction second only to the motion picture and television drama in popularity. Opaque or transparent? And has it gone from one to the other in its relatively brief history? Or has it always, for the most part, been one or the other?

My thesis is that, for the ordinary reader, the novel, for most—of course there are exceptions—is transparent. Furthermore, my conjecture—and pure conjecture it is—is that the novel evolved *from* opaque *to* its present state of transparency.

I have told this story at some length elsewhere, so I will briefly mention it here and without references.[12] In short, the story is this. Silent reading was almost nonexistent until the early Middle Ages. So the experience of fictional narrative from the Homeric epics onward was a *performance* experience. The "reader" was *read to*. Thus, the emergence of the novel as a major art form presented something importantly new and perhaps difficult to assimilate: a fictional narrative meant to be silently read.

Furthermore, the novel is generally written in the form of a narrative delivered by what is sometimes called the "omniscient author" or, if you prefer, the "omniscient narrator." Imagine now how different the experience of hearing and seeing a narrator perform the role of the teller of the tale is from the experience of silently reading a tale told by a disembodied omniscient narrator one can neither hear nor see. Who *is* this metaphysical oddity, and what mysterious metaphysical space does he or she occupy? How too does this metaphysical oddity know what has happened, past and present, and even what is going on in characters' heads: what they are privately thinking and feeling?

What I am suggesting is that the novel where the tale is told by the omniscient narrator must have been for those who first encountered it a troublesome, opaque if you will, text in this respect. And perhaps that is why many of the novels in the genre's early days were written in the form of letters or a diary. Because in that form, the teller of the tale is the fictional letter writer or diarist, a figure that elicits no more metaphysical discomfort than any other fictional personage.

My point, then, is that the omniscient narrator novel, now by far the most common form the novel takes (and has done since the late eighteenth century), was, in the beginning, opaque in that respect and that the passage of time has, in that respect, rendered it transparent. In other words, the omniscient narrator novel, in that respect, is transparent to its present-day readers, the way rhymed couplets, as a storytelling technique, was to Dryden's readers and as opaque to early readers as Dryden's rhymed couplets are, as a storytelling medium, to us.

But at this juncture, I think it is necessary to remind the reader of the reason for my being so concerned with establishing novel transparency. For, I have been insisting, it is being told a story, being "swept up in the story," "taken up with the tale," that has been and remains the novel's predominant *raison d'être*. And it seems to me, one cannot be taken swept up in the story, taken up with the tale, if the text is opaque in Lamarque's sense and is read as Lamarque represents it as being read.

Lamarque himself is exercised over the claims made for novels as sources of knowledge and is very skeptical about them. I, on the other hand, have defended the claim that *one* of the legitimate and intended pleasures we take in novel-reading is the acquiring of knowledge.[13] In this regard, Lamarque writes,

> Readers like to be imaginatively involved with narrative or subject content; they like to find coherence and interest at a broader thematic level; they enjoy and look for formal qualities of structure and design. Do they seek truth as well? Some might. But that, I suggest, is not at the heart of [fictional] literature.[14]

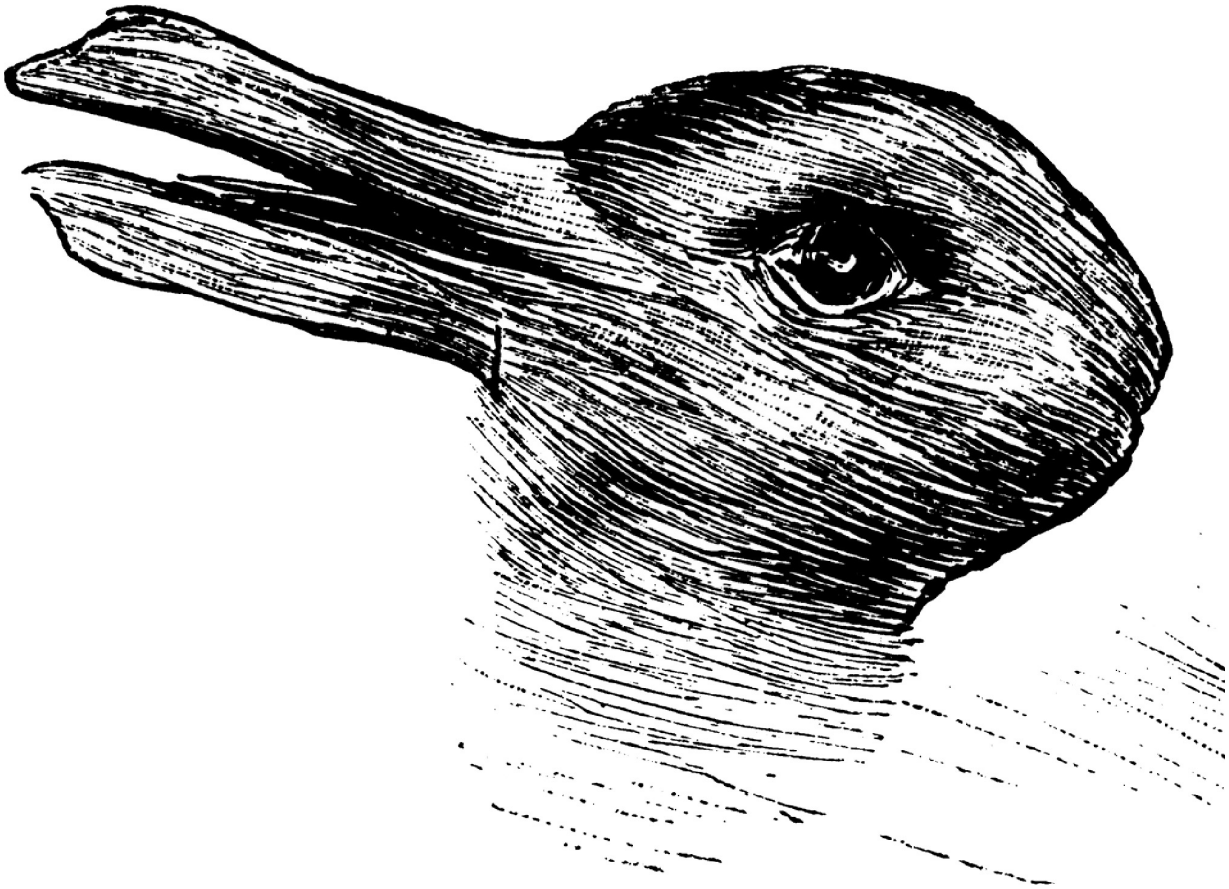
What then *is* "at the heart of literature"? And by "literature," I mean, in this chapter, narrative fiction as it is instantiated in the novel. For Lamarque, I take it that the heart of such literature is as characterized above: readers of novels "like to find coherence and interest at a broader thematic level; they enjoy and look for formal qualities of structure and design."

What I want to suggest and argue for in the concluding section of this chapter is that some few readers read novels as Lamarque describes,

all of the time, but, more importantly, *most* readers do so some small part of the time and many none of the time. Furthermore, for *most* readers, not that mode of attention but *the story* is "at the heart of literature" in its novelistic instantiation.

SHIFTING GEARS

Let me begin by adducing an example made famous in philosophy by Ludwig Wittgenstein: the notorious duck-rabbit (figure 5.1).[15]



The notorious duck-rabbit.

Detail from scanned page of Fliegende Blätter. Public Domain, https://commons.wikimedia.org/w/index.php?curid=18260569

Of this familiar figure, E. H. Gombrich wrote, in *Art and Illusion*, "we can switch from one reading to another with increasing rapidity; we will also 'remember' the rabbit while we see the duck, but the more closely we watch ourselves, the more certainly we will discover that *we cannot*

experience alternate readings at the same time."[16] In other words, we cannot see the figure simultaneously as both a duck and a rabbit.

I now want to suggest that the phenomenon of the duck-rabbit bears a close analogy to the distinction between the opacity versus the transparency of novel texts and the distinction I have been making between "structural reading" of the kind Lamarque describes in his book and the manner in which what I have termed the "ordinary reader" reads a novel. Here is what I have in mind.

The ordinary reader is, I say, "swept up in the story," more or less unaware of, in Lamarque's words, "coherence," the "broader thematic level," the "formal qualities of structure and design." But just as the viewer of the duck-rabbit who is presently seeing it as a duck can, as it were, at will, "shift gears" and see it as a rabbit, so too can the ordinary reader, at times, shift gears and become acutely aware of the coherence, the broader thematic level, the formal qualities of structure and design. I further claim that just as the viewer of the duck-rabbit cannot see it simultaneously as both a duck and a rabbit, the reader cannot simultaneously read a novel *both* as the ordinary reader, swept up in the story, and as the structural reader, acutely aware of the coherence, the broader thematic level, the formal qualities of structure and design. It must be one or the other: duck or rabbit. But which it is is subject to the will. You can shift gears in your reading.

It is crucial though to emphasize that there is no real issue here between Lamarque and me, except perhaps in emphasis. For he too recognizes what I am calling the shifting of gears in novel-reading between the ordinary and structural reader. Thus, Lamarque writes,

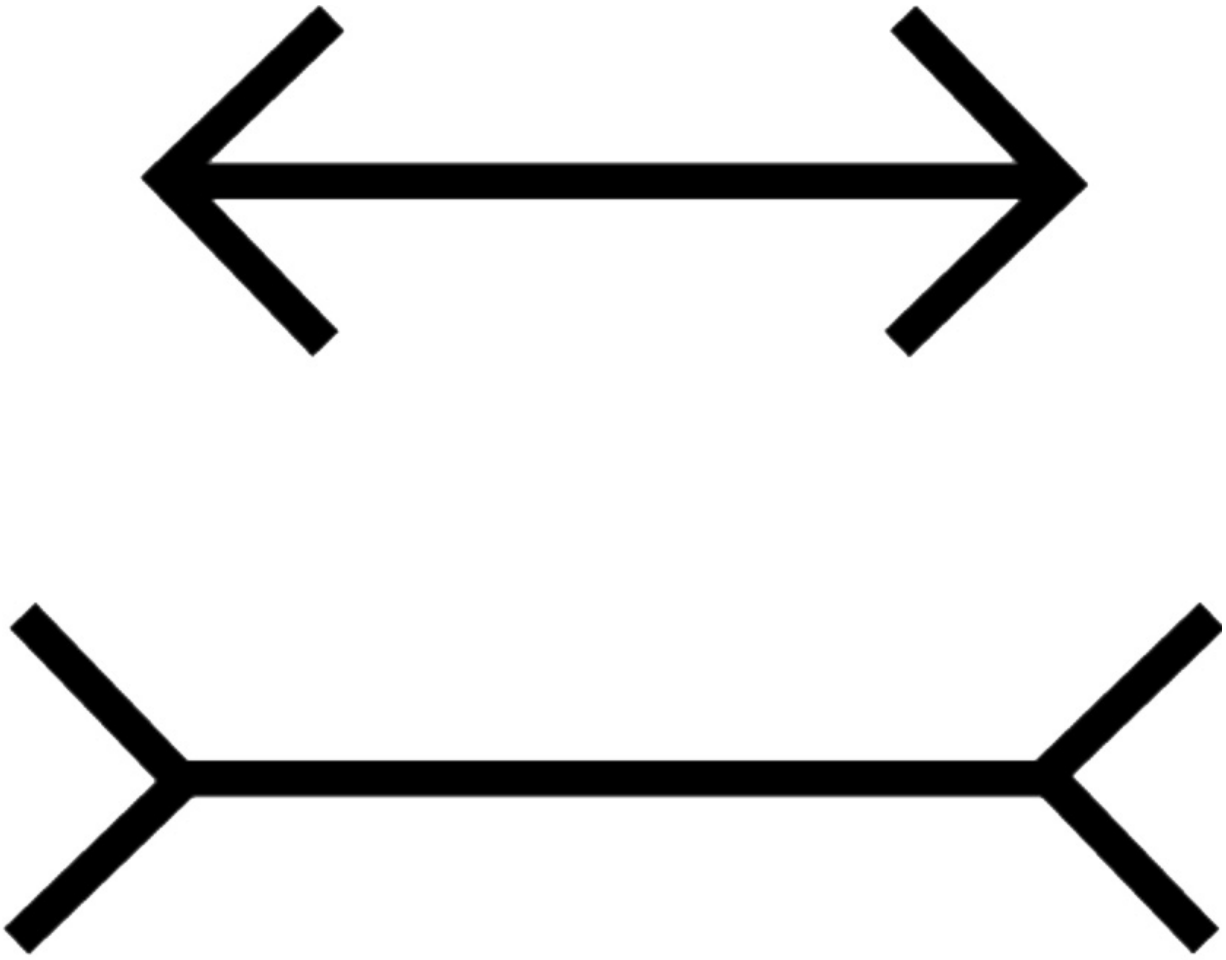
> It is important to recall that no narrative is intrinsically opaque—we read for opacity when we take a certain kind of interest in a narrative. If our interest is simply in plot and character broadly delineated, then we tend to read more transparently than if our interest is in the fine-grained modes in which the content is presented.[17]

My point is not to deny, as Lamarque puts it, that sometimes "we read for opacity." My point simply is that we, as philosophers, should

take more seriously than we seem to do the times “when we tend to read more transparently . . . ,” “our interest . . . simply in plot and character broadly delineated.” For it is that kind of reading and that kind of reader, so I am arguing, that has kept the novel on the best-seller list, alive and kicking among, if you will pardon me for so putting it, “the masses.”

To push on, are there cases in which you can, as I put it, “shift gears” in your reading? I think there are. They are, I suggest, cases like Dryden’s rhymed couplets, where the passage of time has rendered the text permanently opaque to the modern reader. The modern reader cannot, by an act of will, turn her attention away from the obsessive character (to her) of the rhymed couplets and have them become to her a “natural” mode of narration.

What I am claiming here is in direct opposition to the familiar claim that, as David Hume, for example, put it, “a critic of a different age” must place “himself in that point of view, which the performance [i.e., the work of art] supposes.”[18] But, I urge, such a thing is impossible to do. It is not under the power of one’s will to decide to read Dryden with the mind of Dryden’s contemporaries any more than it is in the power of one’s will to decide to hear Beethoven with the ears of his. We can understand *that* and *why* the first audiences of Beethoven’s First Symphony were surprised and even shocked by the opening measures. We cannot ourselves, however, decide to be surprised and shocked. And, in fact, we *cannot* be surprised or shocked. To adduce another well-known illusion from the psychology of perception, to drive home the point, as we can see the duck-rabbit as a duck or a rabbit, we *cannot* see the lines in the Müller-Lyer illusion (figure 5.2) as equal, even when we have assured ourselves and *know* that they are.



Müller-Lyer illusion

It is, though, in our power to shift gears, as described above, in our reading of the vast majority of modern novels written since the genre's inception—shift gears, that is, between what I have called "structural reading" and "ordinary reading": reading the text as opaque, in the manner Peter Lamarque describes, and reading the text as more or less transparent, as, I believe, the vast majority of readers do, swept up by the story, swept up in the tale.

The question is bound to arise at this point as to which is the "correct" way of reading a novel, or, as I prefer to put it, which is the novelistic way to read it—which is the way to read it *qua* novel? And the obvious answer—at least I hope it is obvious to my reader, as it is to me—is *both. Of course*, there are those who read novels in the manner Lamarque describes and in doing so are reading the novel in a novelistic

fashion. But let me suggest—indeed *insist*—that what has kept the novel alive, second only to the movies and television drama as a popular art, is the "ordinary reader": the reader for whom the text is transparent (more or less) and who wishes to be taken up in the tale: swept away by the *story*.

Now I am not by any means suggesting that anyone's reading must be completely uniform. Of course, the structural reader is sometimes oblivious to theme and structure and the aesthetic but taken up with the tale. And of course the ordinary reader may be drawn at times to just those literary artifacts that Lamarque celebrates in *The Opacity of Narrative*. What I am suggesting—indeed insisting—is that what lies at the heart of the majority of novels is *the story*, and what we celebrate over all other virtues in most novelists is *the storyteller* in him or her. And you can substantiate my claim by taking at random any novel from your bookshelves or the fiction section of your local bookstore (if there remains one of that vanishing breed in your vicinity) and peruse the blurbs on the back cover. If the author's storytelling prowess is not the principal selling point, I would be very much surprised.

And that brings us to what seems to me the inevitable conclusion to these proceedings. What has kept the novel alive as so popular a diversion among both the literary learned and the rest of us is a primeval, enduring, deep-seated desire, indeed a *need*, to be told a story. *That* is what lies at the heart of the novel, not its altogether admirable literary and aesthetic qualities. And until we understand the nature, the origin, as well as the endurance of that deep-seated *hunger*, if you will, to be *told a story*, we will not understand the true nature of the novel or the narrative corpus of which it is a part.

NOTES

1. Nicholas Wolterstorff, *Art Rethought: The Social Practices of Art* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015), vi–vii.
2. R. G. Collingwood, *The Principles of Art* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1955), 8–9.
3. Peter Lamarque, *The Opacity of Narrative* (London: Rowman & Littlefield, 2014), 3.

4. Ibid., 59.
5. Ibid., 48.
6. Ibid., 54.
7. Ofer Gal and Raz Chen-Morris, *Baroque Science* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2013), 7–8.
8. Arthur C. Danto, *The Transfiguration of the Commonplace: A Philosophy of Art* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1987), 42–43.
9. Lamarque, *The Opacity of Narrative*, 12.
10. Virgil, *The Works of Virgil Translated into English Verse*, trans. John Dryden, ed. John Carey (London: John Swan, 1803), vol. 2, 1–2.
11. Virgil, *The Aeneid of Virgil*, trans. Rolfe Humphries (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1951), 3.
12. For a more thorough account, see Peter Kivy, *The Performance of Reading: An Essay in the Philosophy of Literature* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2006), esp. 18–23.
13. See Peter Kivy, *Philosophies of Art: An Essay in Differences* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), chapter 5, and Kivy, *The Performance of Reading*, 100–14.
14. Lamarque, *The Opacity of Narrative*, 139.
15. The image referred to appears in Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations*, trans. G. E. M. Anscombe (New York: Macmillan, 1953), 194. Editor's note: The duck-rabbit image reproduced here is from the October 23, 1892, issue of *Fliegende Blätter*.
16. E. H. Gombrich, *Art and Illusion* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1965), 5, emphasis added.
17. Lamarque, *The Opacity of Narrative*, 151.
18. David Hume, "Of the Standard of Taste," in Hume, *Essays: Moral, Political and Literary* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1971), 244–45.

Chapter 6
Tell Me a Story!

Once upon a time . . .

I conjecture that one of the first complete sentences a child utters is, “Tell me a story.” At what age do most children start to comprehend and take pleasure in stories their parents tell or read to them? A distinguished writer and illustrator of children’s books suggested to me that “by four or five they really get them.”[1] The tender age, then, at which the pleasure in fictional narrative manifests itself presses upon us the realization of how deeply engrained in “human nature” the desire for and the propensity to create fictional narrative really are.

One is tempted to say that pleasure in music manifests itself at an even earlier age. But we must be careful here.

To be sure, even infants respond to the mother’s lullaby. The question, however, is when what the child is responding to becomes the *intentional object* that is “music” and not merely soothing sounds.

One reason, in any case, for thinking that pleasure in music, properly so called, precedes pleasure in listening to stories is, of course, that, unlike stories, music does not require linguistic comprehension for its first appreciation. Be that as it may, it can fairly be said that a propensity for music, no less than our propensity for fiction, is deeply engrained in our nature. And anyway, neither the question of which manifests itself first nor that of which is more engrained concerns me here. They both seem to be as old as *Homo sapiens* and perhaps even Neanderthals.

Rather, my concern is simply this. I want to know *why* human beings are so fond of listening to and reading narrative fiction. It seems to me to be the most basic question in the philosophy of literature. Indeed, it is a perplexing question in the philosophy of language as well; witness John Searle’s observation that “It is after all an odd, peculiar, and amazing fact about human language that it allows the possibility of fiction at all.”[2] And furthermore, again in the words of Searle, “why do we attach such importance and effort to [fictional] texts which contain

largely pretended speech acts?. . . I do not think there is any simple or even single answer to that question."[3] It is that question that I want to consider here. I do have a simple answer. But I cannot pretend it is an adequate or completely satisfying answer. For I agree with Searle that there may not even be a single answer.

The question of why we take such interest and pleasure in fictional narrative, either heard or read, is, it appears to me, a parallel question to that of why we take such interest and pleasure in absolute music, which is to say, to put it baldly, meaningless noise. That being said, I want to segue into the question of narrative fiction through the question of absolute music.

MEANINGLESS NOISE?

Pure instrumental music in the classical Western art-musical canon is as enthralling and deeply moving to its devotees as the novels of Dickens, Tolstoy, *et alia* are to theirs. The problem is how and why what are ostensibly long sequences of meaningless sounds can be so enthralling, so deeply moving to their devotees.

It is quite natural, I think, though profoundly mistaken, to seek an answer in an analogy with the literary arts. After all, a fugue or a symphony like *Great Expectations* or *Anna Karenina* consists in a series of "events." So, the analogist's explanation goes, we have a pretty good, believable explanation for what enthralls and deeply moves us in the above-mentioned novels. We are enthralled by the *narrative*, by the *story*, by the unfolding of fictional events, and feel appropriate emotions toward the characters therein. The unfolding of fictional events and the emotions these events arouse are material enough for explaining our enthrallment and our deep emotional responses.

So, the analogist continues, we were wrong to describe pure instrumental music, *absolute* music as it came to be called in the nineteenth century, as a *meaningless* sequence of sounds. Rather, it is a fictional narrative and therefore enthralls and moves us deeply in the same manner as *Great Expectations* or *Anna Karenina*.

The problem for the musical analogist is to convince us that what has *seemed* to so many of us, for so long, as *meaningless* sound

sequences *are*, so to say, hidden fictional narratives, narratives in disguise. *Who* are the characters? *What* are the events that befall them?

At this point the concept of the so-called plot-archetype is frequently invoked. Briefly put, different narrative works can have different plots but the same plot-archetype. Thus, for example, Homer's *Odyssey* and Virgil's *Aeneid* have, needless to say, very different plots and characters but the same plot-archetype, "the long voyage home through numerous trials and tribulations." (No doubt, Virgil had Homer's epic very much in mind when he wrote his own.) What distinguishes symphonies, fugues, and other forms of absolute music from these examples, so the analogist's argument goes, is that they exhibit plot-archetypes only, not plots, which is why we cannot identify in them *specific* events and characters.

But this horse won't run, as I have argued on numerous occasions elsewhere, and to no avail. It is plainly a logical howler to attribute a plot-archetype to an artistic artifact that does *not* have a *plot*! One determines the plot-archetype only after first determining the plot. You cannot have the former without the latter.

Furthermore, again as I have pointed out numerous times before, again to no avail, it is wondrous strange that someone like me, who does not hear stories in absolute music, and there are, I dare say, many more like me, can emerge from a concert of absolute music and honestly say, "I had an enormously satisfying artistic experience." But if the music tells a story and that is what enthralls us about it, then I would be something like someone who heard *Great Expectations* read to her, thoroughly enjoyed it, had "an enormously satisfying artistic experience" in the reading, but admitted to not understanding a word of English. "I was enthralled by the beautiful sounds," she says—a perfectly reasonable remark to make after hearing a string quartet but hardly after hearing a novel read in a language one does not understand.

As well, as I have argued elsewhere, let me add that many think they have made out a case for some work of absolute music's "telling a story" if they have made out a case for the composer's having intended to tell such a story in his music. But a small dose of Grice is a quick cure for this malady. For Grice placed *two* conditions on successful utterance meaning: *intention* to mean something and the choice of a vehicle of

meaning that has some real, palpable chance of conveying that intention to others.[4] And in the case of absolute music, the second condition is not met; witness the fact that thousands upon thousands of listeners have heard the music and not the story, the composer's intentions to the contrary notwithstanding. Intention, after all, even intention to *mean*, can *fail*.

And finally, again as I have argued to no effect, if works such as Beethoven's *Eroica* Symphony and numerous other great works in the classical repertory are, in fact, fictional narratives, they are very strange indeed in the following respect. If, for example, one thinks of the *Eroica*'s first movement as the first act of a play and the exposition the first scene, then it is a play in which the first scene of the first act is performed *twice* before the second scene is performed. Strange goings-on indeed for a fictional narrative! Imagine the same procedure in *Hamlet*!

But even if these objections could be met and we could "explain" our interest in and enthrallment with absolute music as due to absolute music's being in fact fictional narrative, the irony is that it would be no "explanation" at all. We would have reduced a riddle to an enigma: the enigma of fictional narrative. And it is *that* enigma that I wish here to try to resolve, although I hasten to add that what I will be providing is merely a conjecture, perhaps an improbable conjecture at that, not by any means a fully satisfying explanation even to the one who offers it. So on, now, to my central concern in this chapter. Why are we so enthralled by fictional narrative? Why do we have so deep a desire, so deep a need, to be told a story?

REJECTING REDUCTIONISM

"Reductionism," as philosophers and others use the term, is the method of explaining something or some phenomenon that puzzles us by "reducing" it to some other that does not puzzle us: saying, essentially, it may appear to be a such-and-such, but really it is a so-and-so, and since we all know how so-and-so works, we now know how such-and-such works. Thus, it is an instance of reductionism to explain, as above, the interest and charms of absolute music, meaningless sequences of

sounds, by claiming it only *seems* to be meaningless sequences of sounds but is in reality, "reduces to," fictional narrative, the interest and charms of which we fully understand. Absolute music, in other words, is not absolute music: it is a so-and-so, appearances to the contrary notwithstanding, not a such-and-such.

It is natural enough to seek a reductionist explanation for our deeply engrained desire to be told a story and be pleased in the telling. It is natural enough as well for philosophers to reduce the desire for storytelling to the desire for *knowledge*. For, after all, it is *knowledge* with which they are obsessed perhaps above anything else.

The philosophy of art (or at least philosophers' interest in art) begins with Plato (or perhaps Socrates), and so, as well, does the philosophical obsession, if that is not too strong a way of putting it, with reducing our pleasure in the story experience to knowledge seeking (and acquiring). Plato, as will be well known to most of my readers, condemned the poets, Homer in particular, who were, of course, the storytellers of his day, on *epistemic* grounds: on the basis of their fraudulent claim to be conveyers of knowledge to the masses. It was Plato's complaint that many of his compatriots were convinced "that good poets do really know the subjects about which they seem to the multitude to speak well."[5] But, alas, "all writers of poetry, beginning with Homer, copy unsubstantial images of every subject about which they write, including virtue, and do not grasp the truth."[6]

Not surprisingly, supreme literary artist that he was, Plato himself admitted to being susceptible to the allure of poetry. "For," he wrote, "we are conscious of being enchanted by such poetry ourselves though it would be a sin to betray what seems to be the cause of truth."[7]

What *was* it in poetry that "enchanted" Plato so? He gives no indication that it was the *story*; and indeed there may be some reason to doubt that it was. But it surely would not be unreasonable to think that *that* indeed *was* what it was.[8] For, after all, the stories of the *Iliad*, *Odyssey*, *et alia* have enthralled us for hundreds of years and inspired tellings and retellings in narrative fiction since antiquity as well as readings and rereadings of the Homeric epics in modern translations for the Greekless.

Plato, so far as I know, never mentions the stories of the Homeric epics as what "enchanted" him in poetry, nor, therefore, does he ever offer, so far as I know, an explanation for his "enchantment" by them (if indeed I am right about what he is enchanted by) and therefore, obviously, offers no *reductive* explanation for the enchantment. Nevertheless, he can be seen as laying the groundwork for a reductive explanation in his insistence that narrative poetry, in particular, tragic poetry, cannot provide *knowledge* because it is thrice removed from the forms, acquaintance with which, of course, was what constituted true knowledge for Plato. As the well-known indictment of poetry goes in *Republic* X, "Hence, since the tragedian is an imitator we may predicate of him likewise, that he, along with all other imitators, is the third in descent from the sovereign [i.e., the forms, the essence of things] and from the truth."[9]

I say that Plato thereby laid the groundwork for a reductionist explanation of our enthrallment with stories because although he did not provide such an explanation himself, his epistemic critique provided Aristotle with the motive to do so. For many, as do I, take one of the principal objects of Aristotle's *Poetics* to be an answer to Plato's charge that poetry, in particular, tragic poetry, is not a legitimate source of human knowledge. Furthermore, for Aristotle, the soul of tragedy, as well as the source of human knowledge that tragic poetry conveys, is *the plot*, or, in other words, *the story*. And, finally, the *reduction*: the pleasure we take in the plot, in the *story*, is the pleasure we take in gaining the knowledge that the plot, the *story*, imparts.

Briefly, here are the particulars of Aristotle's argument in two steps.

First, in one of the two most memorable passages in the *Poetics*—I take the other to be that concerning the much-discussed catharsis of the tragic emotions—Aristotle distinguished between the tragic poet and the historian in this wise: "A poet differs from a historian, not because he writes in verse and the other in prose . . . but because the historian writes what happened, the poet what might happen."[10] And for this reason, "poetry is more akin to philosophy and is a better thing than history; poetry deals with general truths, history with specific events."[11]

Tragic poetry, then, on Aristotle's view, in that it gives knowledge of the *possible*, gives us knowledge of the *forms*, Plato to the contrary notwithstanding. For the forms are, to put it one way, the possibilities of things.

Aristotle does not, in the passages quoted above, directly connect the knowledge tragic poetry imparts to the pleasure we take in the stories the tragic poets tell. But it is, I think, a safe bet to conclude that that is what he had in mind. For in another well-known passage in the *Poetics*, Aristotle does indeed draw the connection between pleasure and the acquiring of knowledge: "learning things," he writes, "is most enjoyable, not only for philosophers but for others equally."[12] And it is imitation, representation, that is the knowledge giver to which this statement refers. Thus, as Aristotle puts the point, "Hence they enjoy the sight of images because they learn as they look."[13] But imitation, representation, namely, "images" of actions, is exactly what the plots, which is to say, the tragic stories, are.

So it is hardly a stretch to conclude that what Aristotle was claiming is that the "enchantment" of narrative poetry is the pleasure we take in gaining the knowledge it imparts, which, *pace* Plato, is true knowledge: knowledge of the possible; knowledge of the forms. Aristotle, in other words, is, in these matters, what I have been calling a "reductionist"—perhaps the first. If I am correct in my reading of him, he explained our enthrallment with storytelling, at least tragic storytelling, as being the result of the pleasure we take in gaining the knowledge that storytelling, at least tragic storytelling, imparts.

Aristotle, then, in concert with Plato, who laid the groundwork, was the *fons et origo*, I am suggesting, of the reduction of our enthrallment with storytelling to our enthrallment with the acquiring of knowledge. But, to bring us up to date, the flowering of analytic philosophy of art in the latter half of the twentieth century produced at its outset a widespread skepticism toward the notion that literary fiction was a genuine source of human knowledge. It was the Platonic stance, not the Aristotelian, if you will, that gained ascendency.

However, in the more recent past, there has been, as I perceive it, a resurgence of the Aristotelian stance in the form of a spate of claims to

the effect that literary fictions is, indeed, a source, a legitimate source, *qua* literature, of moral, psychological, and even factual knowledge. And I count myself, indeed, as one of the neo-Aristotelians in this regard.[14]

Now none of the defenders of literary fiction as a source of knowledge, with whose views I am acquainted, myself included, is an out-front, self-proclaimed "reductionist" in this regard. None that I am acquainted, with, myself included, has tried explicitly to explain our enthrallment with stories in terms of our enthrallment with the acquiring of knowledge. But, particularly among philosophers, it remains a very strong temptation, implicitly, if not explicitly assumed. So, as they say in the westerns, I want to "Head 'em off at the pass." I want to argue, in other words, that knowledge reductionism is not an attractive option for those, like myself, who are deeply puzzled by our enthrallment with storytelling yet do think narrative fiction can be a legitimate source of knowledge.

So why do I think that knowledge reductionism is a nonstarter as an explanation for our deep-seated enthrallment with storytelling? Well, I do not have an argument with self-evident premises from which the conclusion to that effect inexorably follows. What I do have is a "sense" of literary practice among the generality of readers of fiction, which I hope the readers of this essay share, to the effect that that practice has as its innermost core, its heart of hearts, the desire to be told a story. Whether it was the Homeric epics, *Canterbury Tales*, or, now, the modern novel, *the story's the thing*.

Now I want to be perfectly clear about this. I am not denying that *sometimes* one's *sole* motivation for reading a novel or other form of narrative fiction is to acquire some sort of knowledge. Nor am I denying that some works of literary fiction are sources of important knowledge, that that is a good-making feature of them, and that acquiring that knowledge is a genuine source of legitimate literary satisfaction for readers. And, finally, I am not denying that some works of literary fiction lack almost completely any storytelling interest. So let me go through these items *seriatim*.

That the novels of Charles Dickens are an invaluable source of information about life in Victorian England is undeniably the case. Thus,

it is quite possible that a historian who is engaged in research into social conditions in Victorian England should read the whole Dickensian corpus for the *sole* purpose of milking it for the relevant historical information contained therein. Of course, there are such cases. But they hardly explain the enduring popularity of *Great Expectations* and *Oliver Twist*. What *does* explain it is, of course, that Charles Dickens was one of the great storytellers the world has seen. And the point need be belabored no further.

As well, it is very important for me to make it absolutely clear that I am not denying the legitimacy of the pleasure we may take in the factual knowledge novels and other forms of storytelling may import to us in the literary experience. To instance a case in point, I happened to be talking with a friend of mine, a biologist, as a matter of irrelevant fact, about Mark Twain. And he remarked to me how much he had enjoyed discovering what life was like on the Mississippi in Mark Twain's day in his recent reading of *Huckleberry Finn*. It seemed to me such a natural thing to say and surely a reasonable pleasure to take in a novel. But my friend hardly picked up *Huckleberry Finn* with the primary motive of learning about life on the Mississippi. He picked it up to be told one of the greatest stories ever told in the world of literature. And *had* he read *Huckleberry Finn* for the sole purpose of gleaning from it what life was like on the Mississippi in Mark Twain's day, he would be in the same category as the historian adduced above, who read Dickens for the sole purpose of gleaning from him what life was like in Victorian England. So I need say no more about it.[15]

Finally, a word about "storyless" literature: not, mind you, storyless literature, such as lyric poetry, which is beside the point, but the "storyless" novel. Dr. Johnson is reported by Boswell as having remarked, "Why, Sir, if you read Richardson for the story, your impatience would be so much fretted that you would hang yourself."[16] But far from this being a condemnation of Richardson's novels, it was, rather, an explanation of what *kind* of novel they were. For, as he continued his thought, "But you must read him for the sentiment, and consider the story as only giving occasion to the sentiment."[17] And of course Richardson's *Pamela* and *Clarissa* are not the only such novels that come

to mind. Would you read *Ulysses* or *Finnegans Wake* for the "story"? Would you hang yourself if you did?

But that there are such novels, such "exceptions," if I may, to the storytelling tradition of the novel does not obviate the fact that there is, nonetheless, a deep-seated desire, perhaps even a *need*, among humankind to be told a story, the modern novel being one of the principal means of fulfilling that need. And just to nail down my point, let me quote, not from another academic philosopher or literary theorist, with a philosophical axe to grind, but from a literary man, a reviewer of books for a widely read, popular magazine. "Meaning is a bit of a bore, but storytelling is alive."[18]

But before I get to my solution, such as it is, to the perplexing question of why such a need to be told a story exists at all in the human species, let me explore one more familiar but, I think, in the end, unsuccessful solution.

THE ESCAPE CLAUSE

I have a bookmark that came with a recently purchased novel, bearing the picture of a sailing vessel. Its sails are the pages of books. And it has inscribed above it, as a kind of epigraph, these lines of Emily Dickinson's: "There is no frigate like a book to take us lands away."

Perhaps the poet had something more profound in mind than the way I construe her thought, which is that the book-frigate is our means of *escape* from the dreary land we inhabit to exotic and exciting "lands away." In other words, we are confronted here with the good old notion of story reading as a form of *escapism*. And the pleasure we take in it, then, is the pleasure we take in escaping into a place better, more interesting, more satisfying than the place we now necessarily inhabit.

Schopenhauer, as some of my readers will know, made escapism into a metaphysically grounded philosophy of art. For, as Schopenhauer expressed the much-to-be-desired effect of art, across the board, reading, in the quotation below, the "external cause" as "art," the "inward disposition" as the disposition to create "artworks":

> But when some external cause or inward disposition lifts us suddenly out of the endless stream of willing, delivers knowledge from the slavery of the will, the attention is no longer directed to the motives of willing, but comprehends things free from their relation to the will, and thus observes them without personal interest, without subjectivity, purely objectively, gives itself entirely up to them so far as they are ideas, but not in so far as they are motives. Then all at once the peace which we are always seeking, but which always fled from us on the former path of the desires, comes to us of its own accord, and it is well with us. It is the painless state which Epicurus prized as the highest good and as the state of the gods; for we are for the moment set free from the miserable striving of the will; we keep the Sabbath of the penal servitude of willing; the wheel of Ixion stands still.[19]

There is no need here of, nor have I any intention of, discussing in detail Schopenhauer's murky metaphysics cum philosophy of art. I will only observe, as I have with some thoroughness in the past, that his view, stripped of its metaphysical foundations, which few of us will find tenable, might work pretty well for absolute music but not for any of the arts with representational or semantic content.[20]

In any case, our subject in this place is solely the desire to be told stories. And that being the case, I want, as quickly as I can, to put to rest the familiar notion, the "cliché" is more like it, that the story experience as escape will serve as an explanation for the story obsession, if I may so put it.

Needless to say, escapism is not the absurd view that we *literally* escape into another time, another place, another world, when we read a novel or are told a story, as a convict literally escapes from his prison cell and lives happily ever after in a country without an extradition treaty. What then *does* escapism really amount to?

Of course, the answer that easily, inevitably trips off the tongue is that reading a novel enables us to "imaginatively" escape into another time, another place, another world. But what a can of worms we do open when we try to unpack the concept of the "imagination." And I have no intention of trying to do so here. For I think I can dispatch

escapism by merely relying on what we all agree happens when we are told a story without giving a philosophical analysis of what we all agree happens.

Let me begin with the obvious. There is a genre—if that is the right word for it—of literary fiction called "escapist fiction." Needless to say, to call a novel "escapist" is *not* to pay it a compliment. But that is beside the point. What *is* the point is that if there exists, in ordinary language and literary discourse, a distinction between escapist fiction and fiction that is *not* escapist, it seems to imply, *at least*, that *escapism* can't be an explanation for our interest in all stories: only those that are "escapist" stories.

Imagine now the average Joe, sitting in his armchair, reading a novel. However happy, or unhappy, content or troubled, he may be, I conjecture he is better off, all in all, than Oliver Twist, Anna Karenina, Raskolnikov, Dracula, or any number of fictional characters one might name. Are the worlds of these characters really an improvement over his such that his "escape" into any one of them would ameliorate his present condition: release him from the wheel of Ixion?

The point is that so many of the fictional worlds the average Joe "escapes" into are far worse than the world he inhabits, so it is difficult to see how such an escape would explain his reading behavior. It is true enough that some fictional characters who experience extreme trials and tribulations return to Ithaca and gain happiness in the end. And many an average Joe has an unhappy life with an unhappy outcome. But how many of us average Joes would wish to escape from our average lives into the turbulent worlds of Dickens, Tolstoy, Dostoyevsky, Bram Stoker, and the rest? (Or, for that matter, into the more staid and stable world of Jane Austen?)

I am not for a moment suggesting that there may not be some satisfaction taken in reading some fiction for something called its escapist value. But what the above reflections *are* meant to suggest is that escapism can hardly explain our pleasure in reading *so much* fiction as to render it a nonstarter in explaining our deep-seated desire for and satisfaction in "being told a story," whether or not the story presents a better world and happier inhabitants than our world and us.

So it is now high time (and about time) that I *finally* present the explanation that I hope will do the job. Pleasure in the acquiring of knowledge from stories will not account for our obsession with being told a story. Pleasure in escape will not account for our obsession with being told a story. So what's in it for us in being told a story?

THE STORY GENE

I will cut to the chase. There is *nothing* in it for us. That is to say, the hunger for being told a story is satisfied simply by being told the story (if it is a good story). Being told the story, in other words, is not instrumental in satisfying some *other* hunger: the hunger for knowledge, or moral improvement, or whatever. To put it bluntly, what I am claiming is that the need for being told a story, the pleasure we take in being told a story, is *innate*. We are hardwired to take pleasure in being told stories. Full stop.

Cries of outrage will now inevitably ensue. Innateness! The council of despair! The last refuge of the scoundrel! No explanation at all! Are we going to regress into faculty psychology? Or, following Hutcheson *et alia*, are we to posit a "sense of story," along with the moral sense, the sense of beauty, and so on, *in infinitum*?

The outrage seems fully justified—on first reflection. To say that we love being told stories because we have an innate disposition to love being told stories is obviously little more than to say that we love being told stories because we love being told stories. And I take it that that "explanation" will satisfy no one.

But, on the other hand, it would be foolish to deny that we *do* have innate capacities to which we quite reasonably appeal in our explanations of certain phenomena. What makes such appeals reasonable (when they are reasonable)?

Well, *one* thing that makes such an appeal seem reasonable is a reasonable evolutionary explanation for why the proposed innate capacity has been selected for. Perhaps an example will help here.

It is sometimes claimed that we have an innate capacity for the recognition of faces and their expressions. Our ability to do so evinces

itself so early, in infancy in fact, that its being acquired, its being learnt and not innate, seems unlikely.

Furthermore, there is a believable explanation for why natural selection produced this capacity. The capacity for reading facial expressions has obvious survival value since what the face expresses can tell you whether you are confronted by friend or foe. As well, the capacity is prone to false positives, seeing facial expressions, for example, in ambiguous figures, which also has survival value: in other words, better safe than sorry.

But there is hardly need to belabor the point. Whether or not I have chosen a felicitous example, I presume there is general agreement that human beings possess *some* innate capacities and that they are the result of natural selection.

Now what I want to argue for is the seemingly implausible thesis that there is a plausible evolutionary explanation for what I claim to be our innate, hardwired desire for and pleasure in being told stories, which is to say, fictional narratives. But let me just add an important caveat here.

First, I am by no means the first to offer an evolutionary explanation for our love of the story. Darwin offered an explanation, based on the concept of sexual selection, for the origin of music and threw in storytelling for good measure. The idea, some of my readers will know, was that those who sang the best songs or told the best stories got their mate. And thus the musical and story-listening genes were passed on.[21]

Furthermore, Gregory Currie, in his recent and intriguing book, *Narratives and Narrators: A Philosophy of Stories*, has offered an evolutionary explanation for the origin of narrative fiction, based on our need for communication, that bears some resemblance to mine.[22] But I believe mine is significantly different enough to be offered as a more successful alternative, as I shall argue at the close of this section.

However, readers of my book *Once-Told Tales* will, no doubt, be more than a wee bit surprised at my offering here my own evolutionary tale to explain our innate penchant for fictional tale telling and tale listening. For in that book, I expressed what I took to be a healthy skepticism toward evolutionary fantasies.[23]

Well, I still maintain that skepticism and still believe it is healthy. But, alas, like smoking, one recognizes the risk and nevertheless indulges the habit. So, my own skepticism to the contrary notwithstanding, here I go.

I begin the task by adducing a well-attested-to fact, known by acquaintance by anyone past a certain age and fully endorsed by psychologists and brain scientists. It is the simple fact that, with age, long-term memory far outlasts short-term memory. Thus, I can't remember what I had for breakfast, where I put the car keys, or why I just walked into the bedroom. But I can remember vividly my fifth birthday, my high school graduation in 1952, and my first legal glass of beer in Ann Arbor, Michigan.

Furthermore, there is a plausible, widely accepted, I believe, evolutionary explanation for this remarkable fact. Imagine, now, what it might have been like in the very early days of *Homo sapiens*, as far back, let us imagine, as the time when *Homo sapiens* still shared the stage with Neanderthals.

Life indeed must have been nasty, brutish, and short. But there were, nevertheless, relatively speaking, "young folks" and "old folks." And one can imagine them sitting around the fire, of an evening—Prometheus had already done his job!—"telling stories." Homeric epics they were not. And I suspect they were not yet fiction. What, then, would they have been?

One is justified in supposing that the "stories" would have taken the form of "reminiscences" imparted to the young folks rather than "fiction." And there obviously would be no point in the young folks telling the old folks *their* reminiscences. After all, *they* knew what happened yesterday. So there was no need to impart the information to anyone else.

But we are now closing in on our quarry. For we may well ask what the *content* of these reminiscences was. And I dare say, like such reminiscences of old folks today, much of it would have been the usual anecdotes of who said what and who did what. *Some* of it, though, may well have contained knowledge of *use* to the gathered listeners: knowledge of how to do this or that or the other practical task. And since we are talking about a time long before the invention of writing,

storytelling of the kind I am describing would be the *only* means of transmitting such knowledge from generation to generation.

What the tribe learned to do yesterday, of course, everyone with short-term memory knew. But something the tribe learned to do a long while ago that was not passed on in practice might still live on in the memory of one of the old ones since, by hypothesis, long-term memory outlasts short-term memory and be passed on in storytelling. For that to happen, long-term memory would have to endure into old age. There would, however, be no particular value in short-term memory enduring into old age since for the most part, it possesses what is accessible to those without long-term memory. Hence, the longer life of long-term memory is selected for. It has survival value in its storing of practical knowledge and skills that might otherwise be lost, and storytelling has survival value in its function of imparting such knowledge and skills to *those who listen*.

Question: But who wants to listen to some old geezer rambling on about "the good old days"? Answer: Lots of people, perhaps, but *for sure*, someone just *born* to love stories. Conclusion: An inborn love of being told a story *assures* that the storyteller will be heard and useful skills therein, if there are such, imparted to the listener and, thereby, to the tribe. Thus, there is a reason why the innate desire to be told a story might be selected for. Passing on knowledge and skills has survival value. Storytelling was, for Neanderthals and their *Homo sapiens* contemporaries, the major source of becoming acquainted with knowledge and skills acquired in the past, beyond the possibility of short-term memory to acquire. An innate desire to be told stories thus maximizes the chance of the stories being heard and so maximizes the chance of the knowledge and skills of past generations being passed on to future generations. Of course, if some specific story contained no such information concerning skills or knowledge, the storytelling desire would produce a false positive. But that is no argument against the evolutionary account here given. As is well known, evolution gives quick and, therefore, "sloppy" solutions. False positives are therefore common. But, again, better safe than sorry. And so we have an evolutionary explanation, in terms of natural selection for our innate, hardwired desire to be told a tale.

But now, as I promised, I will try to show the advantage of my natural selection account of our pleasure in narrative over Currie's very similar one. Without going into detail concerning Currie's natural selection story of how our pleasure in narrative evolved, which I have done in my book *Once-Told Tales*, here is the gist of it in his own words:

> My suggestion, therefore, is this: that the human capacity for linguistic communication co-evolved with a taste for significantly narratized accounts of people's behaviour. The elaboration of language made even more complex narratives possible, while the growing preference for narrative served to dampen the tendency to use language deceptively, by facilitating reliable information flow concerning deceptive behaviour.[24]

However, as I argued in *Once-Told Tales*, and I take the liberty of quoting myself,

> What strikes one straightaway about Currie's conjecture, if I rightly understand it, is that it purports to explain how our appetite for *factual* narrative evolved. For the heart of the matter is the conveying of information about the real world without fear of deception by the real-world narrator. But what explains our appetite for *that* kind of narrative—namely, narrative conveying information about what actually happened—does not explain our appetite for *fictional* narrative, which is, of course, narrative of what never happened at all.[25]

But unlike Currie's natural selection story, mine explains our appetite for narrative *tout court*. For I have argued that our appetite for narrative, *any narrative*, had survival in that it assured the attention of the listener to narrative *tout court* and therefore increased the likelihood of him or her listening to *factual* narrative.

Evolution, then, I am suggesting, has bestowed upon us a "story gene." Of course, I am not using the term "gene" in its technical, biological sense but rather in what has become its colloquial sense of "innate," "inborn," "hardwired," the product of "nature," not "nurture,"

or what you will. But a word is in order concerning the “nature”-versus-“nurture” dichotomy. To say that one is born with an innate disposition or ability does *not* imply that that innate disposition or ability will necessarily manifest itself. Some will. Others, however, will manifest themselves only if the proper conditions obtain to trigger them. And the “story gene” may perhaps be of the latter kind.

But let me now briefly examine two empirical hypotheses, neither of which I know to be true, that might be relevant to my hypothesis.

Suppose it were the case that there is not and never has been any human society in which the enjoyment in being told a story was absent. Would that be conclusive evidence for my claim that pleasure in being told a story has been evolutionarily selected for and therefore innate? By no means. It would be *consistent* with the innateness claim but not conclusive evidence for it. For, as Jesse Prinz points out in his recent book *The Emotional Construction of Morals*, “There are many human capacities that are nearly universal but not innate.”[26]

Suppose, contrariwise, it were discovered that there are or have been human societies in which the enjoyment in being told a story is not present. Would that be conclusive evidence against my claim that enjoyment in being told a story is evolutionarily selected for and is therefore innate? By no means. For it can, I would claim, as moral values can, on Prinz’s view, “be embellished and overturned under the influence of culture.”[27]

What is important is to observe now that the supposed connection between the pleasure we take in being told stories and the acquiring of knowledge and skills is not altogether off the wall. The story gene, so I am suggesting, was selected for *because* the acquiring of knowledge and skills from stories had survival value in prehistory. And having an innate disposition to enjoy being told stories would increase the chances of one’s being told stories, listening to them, and reaping the benefits thereof.

It would, however, obviously be committing the genetic fallacy to argue that since our enthrallment with being told stories originated for the purposes of our acquiring knowledge and skill, that is what its purpose now remains. On the contrary, what I want to claim is that our

enthrallment with stories has long outlived the purposes for which it was selected. It is, as it were, a "vestigial organ" but, for all of that, a pleasurable presence and, unlike the appendix, a harmless one, so far as I know, if not taken to excess.

However, I want to reemphasize that the view I am proposing is perfectly consistent with the view, so prevalent in the philosophy of literature today and one that I share, that the novel and other genres of narrative fiction are genuine sources of knowledge, the pleasure taken in acquiring such knowledge from them, if I may so put it, a "legitimate" literary pleasure.

CONCLUSION: THE STORY AND . . .

I have argued that *the* reason we are enthralled by being told a story is that we are innately disposed to take pleasure in storytelling. And I have argued as well that we are motivated to read novels, attend plays, and consume other genres of fiction solely by our innate love of being "told a story." Furthermore, it seems clear to me that were something other than storytelling the purpose of narrative fiction, it never would have survived. The story's the thing.

But it surely does not follow from that that the pleasures we take in acquiring knowledge from fiction, in being morally challenged by it, not to mention the aesthetic satisfaction derived therefrom, are somehow unimportant or not relevant to our experience of narrative fiction. To put it in general terms, if my sufficient, operative, overriding motive for engaging in some activity is always one thing, there may very well be *other* contributing motives for enjoying the activity than that sufficient, operative, overriding motive. And one or more of those contributing motives for engaging in that activity might well lead one to engage in one kind of that activity rather than another.

Thus, to adduce a relevant example, I have just read a shilling-shocker, with a rollicking good story, that I have thoroughly enjoyed. And I see another one by the same author in the fiction section of my local bookstore. I feel more inclined this time, however, to read a novel with more "substance" to it, so that I can come away from it having been told a rollicking good story, to be sure, but having "learned something" into

the bargain. So I choose Dickens instead. To be told a rollicking good story was my sufficient, operative, overriding motive for deciding to read another novel. Yet the motive that determined my choice of Dickens over another shilling-shocker was, in the end, my desire for knowledge and moral enlightenment.

And let me reemphasize what I have already insisted upon, that the satisfaction experienced in acquiring knowledge from narrative fiction is not some kind of "extra benefit" of the literary experience, like winning the door prize. It is a legitimate *part* of the literary experience, as are other but not, by any means, all of the beneficial results of consuming narrative fiction. That having been established, I will press on to my conclusion.

I have observed, I can't say argued, that there appears to be a deep-seated need for, a deep-seated pleasure in, being told stories, a deep-seated hunger, if you will, for narrative fiction, in the human species, that emerges very early in life and apparently emerged very early in human history. And I find this phenomenon, as do others, I presume, deeply puzzling. As I quoted John Searle above, "It is after all an odd, peculiar, and amazing fact about human language that it allows the possibility of fiction at all."

I explored the obvious possibility, attractive to philosophers, among others, as far back as Aristotle, of a reductionist explanation to the effect that our pleasure in narrative fiction arises from the pleasure we take in acquiring the knowledge that narrative fiction can impart. But I rejected such explanations as simply not fitting the facts of the practice of narrative fiction as it is and as it has been since time immemorial: as far back as the Homeric epics, if not before.

As well, I made note of the familiar and widespread notion that escapism might constitute the lure of fictional narrative, it enabling us to "escape" imaginatively into better or, at least, more interesting "worlds" than our own. But I rejected the notion as simply not applicable to all fictional narrative, by any means, and, in a word, "not true to the facts."

What I then suggested was that it might not be unreasonable to construe this deep-seated desire to be "told a story" as a hardwired, innate disposition. And I then went on to try to make this suggestion plausible by proposing an evolutionary explanation for its presence

based on what I imagined might be its survival value, early on, and, therefore, a product of natural selection.

Now I am fully aware, as I have already assured the reader, of the pitfalls of evolutionary theorizing from the armchair. It is all too easy and liable to produce what Stephen J. Gould derisively termed "just-so stories." So skepticism of my theorizing is fully justified.

But if our deep-seated desire for stories is not, as I have claimed, innate, the skeptic is obliged to provide an alternative explanation. Or, to put it another way, the skeptic is obliged to *complete* the following sentence: "The story's the thing *wherein* . . ." Wherein *what*? But that's another story. I wish the skeptic good luck with it.

NOTES

1. Molly Bang (e-mail). See also the following, from the front page of the *New York Times*: "In June, the American Academy of Pediatrics advised doctors to remind parents at every visit that they should read to their children from birth, prescribing books as enthusiastically as vaccines and vegetables" (October 12, 2014).
2. John Searle, "The Logical Status of Fictional Discourse," in *Philosophy of Literature: Contemporary and Classic Readings*, ed. Eileen John and Dominic McIver Lopes (Oxford: Blackwell, 2004), 114.
3. Ibid., 117.
4. Paul Grice, *Studies in the Way of Words* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1989), p. 219.
5. Plato, *The Republic of Plato*, trans. John Llewlyn Davies and David James Vaughan (London: Macmillan, 1950), 340 (599).
6. Ibid., 343 (600).
7. Ibid., 352–53 (607).
8. I have, in the past, opined that what Plato was "enchanted" by in poetry is what we now would call its "aesthetic" qualities: the aesthetically enchanting qualities of the poetic language. I am now more convinced that it is the story. Of course, it could be both. On this, see Peter Kivy, *Once-Told Tales: An Essay in Literary Aesthetics* (Chichester: Wiley-Blackwell, 2011), 15–16.
9. *The Republic of Plato*, 339 (597).

10. Aristotle, *The Poetics*, trans. G. M. A. Grube, in *Aristotle on Poetry and Style*, ed. G. M. A. Grube (Indianapolis: Bobbs-Merrill, 1958), 18 (IX).
11. Ibid.
12. Ibid., 7 (IV).
13. Ibid.
14. For my views in this regard, see, for example, Peter Kivy, *Philosophies of Arts: An Essay in Differences* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), and chapter 3 in this volume.
15. For more on this, see chapters 3 and 4 in this volume.
16. James Boswell, *The Life of Samuel Johnson L.L.D.* (New York: Modern Library, n.d.), 413 (April 6, 1772).
17. Ibid.
18. James Wood, "Soul Cycles," *The New Yorker*, September 8, 2014, 78.
19. Arthur Schopenhauer, *The World as Will and Idea*, trans. R. B. Haldane and J. Kemp (London: Kegan Paul, Trench, Trubner, 1896), vol. 1, 254.
20. On this, see Kivy, *Philosophies of Arts*, chap. 7.
21. On this, see Charles Darwin, *The Origin of Species and the Descent of Man* (New York: Modern Library, n.d.), 881.
22. See Gregory Currie, *Narratives and Narrators: A Philosophy of Stories* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010), 42–48.
23. Peter Kivy, *Once-Told Tales: An Essay in Literary Aesthetics* (Chichester: Wiley-Blackwell, 2011), 147–54.
24. Currie, *Narrations and Narrators*, 47.
25. Kivy, *Once-Told Tales*, 151.
26. Jesse J. Prinz, *The Emotional Construction of Morals* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), 270.
27. Ibid., 245–46.

Chapter 7

The Dancer and the Dance

When the poet wrote, “How can we tell the dancer from the dance?,” he was indeed a poet, not a philosopher.[1] But the question he put is a profound one in the philosophy of art, as I am not the first philosopher to observe.

The import of Yeats’s line has been variously construed. My own purpose is to construe it in such a way as to help me work my passage to something like a defense or at least an elucidation of my claim, in *The Performance of Reading*, that silent novel-reading is a kind of “performance.” And the first stage in that passage, naturally enough, is animadversions on the line in question, namely, “How can we tell the dancer from the dance?”

THE QUESTION

As I will interpret Yeats’s line here, it is in the form of a rhetorical question with a negative answer. Question: “How can we tell the dancer from the dance?” Answer: “We *can’t*.” And I will add to my interpretation the explanation for *why* the answer is: “We *can’t*.” Explanation: “We can’t tell the dancer from the dance because they are numerically the same,” under the assumption that the dance is not notated.

To make this clear, compare Yeats’s question to two similar ones. “How can we tell the singer from the song?” and “How can we tell the soloist from the sonata?” Obviously, the singer is that flesh-and-blood soprano, and the song is that sequence of linguistic and musical noises emanating from her mouth. Obviously, the soloist is that flesh-and-blood man sitting at the Steinway, pressing the keys, and the sonata is that sequence of musical noises emanating from that noble instrument.

But, clearly, the dance, unlike the song and the sonata, is not an entity separate from the performer. It does not emanate from the dancer as the song from the singer or the sonata from the actions of the piano player upon his instrument. The dance just *is* the dancer—or, rather, the dancer in motion during a specified period of time, which of course is why we cannot tell the dancer from the dance.

Let me now, however, add some familiar complications to the story. The singer is performing Schubert's *Gretchen am Spinnrade*, the pianist is performing Beethoven's *Moonlight Sonata*, and the dancer is performing a dance choreographed by Jerome Robbins and recorded in one of the newly developed dance notations. The questions, then, that I now want to raise are these. How do we tell the song from the song? How do we tell the sonata from the sonata? How do we tell the dance from the dance?

These questions appear to be—and indeed were so meant to appear—nonsensical questions. But properly construed, they are far from nonsensical and are, in fact, at the heart of the matter of this chapter.

What I mean to ask in all three of these questions is how to tell the difference between the performance of the work and the work. But I am *not* raising the well-known ontological question of work status. That is to say, I am not raising the question of what kind of a "thing" the work is and what its relation is to the sounds, made by the performer of the work, commonly known as a performance of the work. And ditto for the notated dance. What question I *am* asking is the next order of business.

THE OTHER QUESTION

Consider now what I think of as your average concertgoer. The concerts are of what is commonly known as "classical music." And I do not mean by the "average concertgoer" some kind of dolt or philistine but rather a lover of the classical art-music canon who has a subscription to the Philharmonic and attends chamber music and solo recitals as well. She does not have a PhD in musicology, nor is she an amateur musician. She has, shall we say, a "program notes" knowledge of music and knows what she likes. Finally, I opine that the person I have just described and her ilk constitute the vast majority of those who populate the concert halls of the Western world where classical music is performed.

Now our average concertgoer, as described above, encounters a friend in her favorite bar and says to him, "I heard the *Eroica* last night at Carnegie Hall." Her friend, who is something of a pedant, replies, "No! You didn't hear the *Eroica*. You heard a *performance* of the *Eroica*."

Now the reason I call the concertgoer's friend a pedant is because what the concertgoer said she "heard" is quite in accordance with ordinary language usage, colloquial English, the way the man on the street and the woman on the Clapham omnibus speak. And that fact, as I presume it to be, will loom very large in what follows.

The concertgoer's friend might, however, be more than a mere pedant. Perhaps he is a *philosopher*. And if so, he may go on in this familiar manner. "If you had told me you saw the *Mona Lisa*, last night, I would not have corrected you. For the *Mona Lisa* is a physical object, located in a certain place, in full view. But the *Eroica* is what we philosophers call an 'abstract object,' a 'type,' some of us call it, of which each performance is a 'token.' And you can't *hear* an abstract object, or causally interact with it in any way. What you *can* hear is a token of the type, the *Eroica* symphony, a *performance* of it, which is, loosely speaking, a physical object, a sequence of sounds, perturbations of the air. *That* is what you heard, which is why I had to correct you. You did not hear the *Eroica*, you can now understand. You heard a *performance* of it."

The philosopher is raising a familiar point. But it is not the point I am concerned with pursuing in the present chapter. What I *am* very interested in is our average concertgoer's simple, unadorned, presystematic statement to the effect that she heard last night the *Eroica* symphony, *simpliciter*, not that she heard a *performance* of it. I think there is something to be learnt from that—from the way ordinary people, untainted by philosophy, speak about what they *hear* at concerts—worthy of the philosopher of art's scrutiny.

WHAT DO WE HEAR?

Why does it seem so natural to say, "I heard the *Eroica* last night"? And, for that matter, why does it sound so natural to ask, "What did you hear last night"? Why not, "I heard a *performance* of the *Eroica* last night?" Or "What did you hear *performed* last night?" It is not that the latter two seem unnatural, which is to say, unidiomatic. But surely the former fall more trippingly from the tongue.

One answer that comes immediately to mind is simply an appeal to the "economy," if you will, of colloquial speech. In other words, why say it in many words, in ordinary conversation, when you can say it in few? "Performance" and "performed" are redundant, implicit in "I heard [a performance of] the *Eroica* last night" and "What did you hear [performed] last night?" But being redundant, implicit, and therefore understood, there is no need for them to be enunciated. Extra verbiage is shunned in ordinary conversation. Verbal parsimony is the custom.

As a generalization concerning ordinary speech, I imagine that this principle of verbal parsimony is valid enough. But in the present special case, I want to adduce a radically different explanation that, I believe, reveals something of importance about our experience of music—and the performing arts in general—that is likely to seem highly counterintuitive yet true nevertheless when properly construed. To put it baldly, the reason our average concertgoer and music lover, as described above, does not say that she heard a *performance* of the *Eroica* is, quite simply, because *she did not hear a performance of it*.

But surely my reader, at reading the preceding sentence, will conclude that its author is quite mad. How could our listener have *heard* the *Eroica* last night without having heard a *performance* of it? The symphony was performed in Carnegie Hall by a large ensemble of talented artists. What they produced was a *performance*. And in hearing the *Eroica*, our music lover was, *ipso facto*, hearing a *performance*. If she did not hear the performance, she did not hear the symphony. Case closed.

Furthermore, I described the performers just now as performing *artists*. And, as do some philosophers of art, I take that description literally, which is to say, take such performers to be artists, the products of their artistry performances, and therefore artworks in their own right. [2] So when our average concertgoer hears the *Eroica* in Carnegie Hall, she is in the presence, apparently, of *two* sonic artworks: the symphony and the performance thereof. Our concertgoer is directly confronting two sonic *artworks*, one of which I am claiming she does not hear. Does that make sense? It seems utterly off the wall. How can that be?

Well, in reality, there is no profound paradox here, as a simple example will demonstrate. Suppose there is an exhibition of Matisse's paintings at the Museum of Modern Art. Some of the pictures are in the museum's permanent collection, but many others are on loan from other museums. As museum parlance has it, the show was "hung" by someone who is an expert in these matters and has arranged the paintings in an "artistic" manner as to make them viewable in a way that is optimal and in good taste. Perhaps hanging such shows is an "art," in its own right, or perhaps (merely?) a "skill." That is an interesting question but irrelevant for present purposes.

Your average museumgoer attends the Matisse exhibition, as does the art critic for a popular magazine. They both see the paintings. Did they both *see* the "hanging"—how the paintings were hung? The answer is "yes" and "no."

I doubt if the average museumgoer is aware of the existence of "experts" who "hang" exhibitions of paintings. She has certainly seen "how" the paintings were hung in the sense that she saw the paintings in the order and at the viewing level intended: juxtaposed one to another as intended. But she was not, as we might say, directly attending, consciously, to the way the curator of the show had exercised his artistry or skill in hanging the show. However, that is exactly one of the things the art critic *was* attending to, was directly aware of—part of his job to evaluate. At some point in his viewing of the exhibition, he switched his attention from the paintings to the *way* in which the paintings had been hung. Thus, what we want to say is that both the museumgoer and the art critic "saw" the way in which the exhibition was hung, though only the critic "attended to," was acutely aware of, the way it was hung.

I consider the above case, as stated, to be uncontroversial. That is why I chose it to be an illustration, in art appreciation, of the distinction between seeing *simpliciter* and seeing in the manner of being consciously, acutely, directly aware. And what I now want to go on to claim is that the average concertgoer's experience, vis-á-vis hearing the work and hearing the performance, is much the same in principle although not perhaps in degree. It is, I am fully aware, a far more controversial claim. But I am convinced of it nevertheless and hope to convince my reader of it as well.

The contrast between the museumgoer and the art critic has a direct musical analogue, of course, in the contrast between the average concertgoer, as characterized above, and the music critic. Put baldly, the former hears the music, the latter the performance.

Needless to say, this is an exaggeration. It is an exaggeration, however, surrounding a kernel of truth.

It is, perhaps, an allusion to something like the truth I speak of that Arthur Danto was making in *The Transfiguration of the Commonplace* when he wrote that "in the performance of music, it is the goal of certain players to evacuate themselves from the space between audience and sound; to the extent that the audience is conscious of the musician it is distracted from the music."[3] One wonders, at first, whether Danto is talking about the musicians evacuating themselves from the audience visually or sonically. Does the audience cease to be visually aware of the musicians or cease to be aware of the performance as opposed to the music, to the work?

The first interpretation is not as absurd as it might first appear. After all, we know, for example, that listening to music or a cell phone while driving reduces visual awareness, as the statistics on traffic accidents amply demonstrate: engaging one of your sense modalities reduces the effectiveness of the others. Thus, it might be suggested, a concertgoer who becomes engrossed in observing the appearance and actions of the musicians is bound to have her attention to the sounds they are producing reduced.

But although the above is a *possible* interpretation of what Danto had in mind, I do not think it is the right one. For the remark occurs, albeit in passing, in a discussion of artistic *media*. And the medium of music is, of course, sound, not the visible appearance and actions of the musicians. The dancer is the dance; however, the musician is not the music.

Rather, I take it that the point Danto was at least hinting at is *my* point. *His* point was that concentrating on the musical performance—what the musicians produce by their actions—takes away from the listener's concentrating on, or as Danto put it, distracts them from, "the music." *My* point is that the average concertgoer, as described above,

generally is aware of the music, not the performance thereof, which is why the average concertgoer is more liable to say, “I heard the *Eroica* last night” than “I heard a *performance* of the *Eroica* last night.”

Let me illustrate the point I am making with an example from my own concert experience. I recently attended an all-Mozart concert consisting of the Overture to *The Impressario* (K. 496), the Oboe Concerto in C (K. 314), and the Symphony No. 39 in E-flat (K. 543)—a short concert on Christmas Eve. I was quite familiar with all three works and particularly the Oboe Concerto, as I am an amateur oboist, which is the point of the story.

I listened to the Overture and Symphony like, I presume, most everyone else in the audience. But it was a different matter entirely with the Oboe Concerto. My eyes were absolutely glued on the oboe soloist. I watched his every move. Furthermore, I was acutely aware of and thought about every nuance of his performance. I noticed, for example, the almost complete absence of vibrato and wondered whether he was an adherent to the view that vibrato was used sparingly, if at all, in the eighteenth century. And when he performed his cadenzas, I kept listening for, among other things, whether he exceeded the capabilities of Mozart’s oboe in his execution of the notes above the staff. (He employed a modern oboe, not a “period instrument.”) As well, I was much admiring of his extreme pianissimo, particularly in the very low and very high registers of the instrument, where such is very difficult to achieve. In short, I most assuredly heard the *performance* and, I think, as an artwork in its own right, although that claim will not be essential to my argument.

So I heard, was acutely aware of, the *performance* of the Concerto: how the Concerto was *performed*. But did I hear *the Concerto*? That certainly sounds an odd question. How could I have heard a performance *of* the Concerto without hearing *it*? I shall return to this question by and by. For now, however, I want to consider what the rest of the audience heard—the average concertgoers, as described above, who were not amateur oboists into the bargain.

Well, to begin with, I think we all, myself included, heard, as to the Overture and the Symphony, *the work*, although I would not want to

deny that one's attention did not flit, on occasion, from work to performance or, for that matter, to a neighbor's cough or whisper.

But what about the Concerto? Unlike me and any others in the audience who may have had a special interest in and knowledge of oboes and how they are played, I would suggest that what the general audience heard was primarily *the work*, not the performance thereof. Of course, a concerto is intended to, among other things, display the virtuosity of the performer. And surely any attentive member of the audience heard *that* when they heard Mozart's Oboe Concerto.

There is, though, an important distinction to be made here. The virtuosic *passages* in the Oboe Concerto are aesthetic features of the work, whereas the *execution* of the passages by the virtuoso is an aesthetic feature of the performance. Which did the average concertgoer, as described above, hear? Which did I hear? A reasonable answer would seem to be that we both heard both, but in different degrees. I, obviously, because of the way my attention was directed, heard more of the execution, the average concertgoer more of the work.

We can, I think, now understand why the following colloquies are idiomatic and make sense. One of the average concertgoers, as described above, says to a friend, "I went to an all-Mozart concert last night." But when *I* say to a friend that I went to an all-Mozart concert last night and he asks what I heard, I am likely to reply, "Well for one thing, I heard an impressive performance of the Oboe Concerto, although to my taste, a bit lacking in expressiveness." *My* friend finds it perfectly natural for me to say I heard a *performance* of the Oboe Concerto—he knows I am an amateur oboist. And the average concertgoer's friend finds it perfectly natural for her to say that she heard the Overture, the Concerto, and the Symphony, not *performances* thereof.

At this point, I am ready to draw an important conclusion from the above animadversions on work and performance. And it is this. Even in something like the performance of classical music, where the distinction between work and performance seems very clear, where one can tell the dancer from the dance with no trouble at all, it is more natural to say that we have heard the work, not the performance thereof. Furthermore, while of course we have all heard the performance in order to hear the work, we, at least the average concertgoers as described above, have not

“heard” it in the sense of being acutely aware of it, as the music critic might be (or someone like me who has a particular reason for attending to *how* a particular work, like the Oboe Concerto, is performed).

So the point is that even where it is conceptually clear what is the dancer and what is the dance, what is the performance and what is the work, in colloquial speech it is far more common to say, “I heard the Symphony,” not “I heard a performance of . . .” And colloquial speech, I am maintaining, reflects reality. Generally, we hear music, not its performance. It takes a special effort—a change in attitude—to hear the latter.

And that brings me to the next step in my argument here. I want to go from the usual case of being performed to by another or others to being performed to *oneself* by oneself.

SELF-PERFORMANCE

Imagine, now, a pianist alone in her home, playing the *Moonlight Sonata* to herself, for the pleasure of it. Of course, part of the pleasure she takes is in the actual *playing*. But there would be no pleasure in *that* without her *hearing* the *music* she is playing. And now let us ask our old familiar question in this new setting. Is the pianist hearing the performance or the work?

I opine that she is, in all probability, hearing the work because, I further opine, it is extremely difficult for someone to hear *how* a work is being performed if she herself is the one performing it. I do not say it is impossible. But it would require a kind of reverse concentration that it is difficult to imagine someone accomplishing without extreme effort and then for only brief interludes.

There is not only a spatial separation between performer and audience in the concert hall but a separation of deeper significance as well. The performers are doing one thing, their audience another: obviously the one performing, the other listening. Our pianist, however, is both performing and listening. And listening to how she is performing while she is performing is no easy thing. Let me make this clear by altering the example somewhat.

Let us suppose our pianist is a young professional, preparing for one of her first concerts, in which one of the works she has chosen to perform is the *Moonlight Sonata*. It would surely be natural enough for her to invite someone to listen to her *performance* and to offer a critique. And it would be natural enough as well to, say, invite her former teacher to be her critical audience.

Why does she need this audience of one? An obvious explanation—and a correct one—is "to get a second opinion." But there is another, deeper explanation as well, namely, as I have been arguing, that it is very difficult—and in some respects impossible—to listen to your own performance, so the presence of *another*, fit to judge and comment upon your performance, is required.

I am now ready to take the final step in my argument: from performing to oneself to reading to oneself as performing to oneself. But to prepare myself and my reader for this final step in my argument, let me review the argument as it has proceeded so far.

I began with the dance and the claim, taking off from Yeats's famous line, that in a dance not notated, there is no distinction between the dancer and the dance. The performance is the work, and the dancer dancing is the performance. When one sees the dancer, one *eo ipso* sees the performance, and when one sees the performance, one *eo ipso* sees the work. In other words, work, performance, and performer are inseparable.

I then moved on to the familiar case of the concert performance, in the classical music tradition, and the audience of it. And I argued that even here, where there is a clear conceptual distinction between performance and work, as well as an obvious physical distinction between performer and performance—the soloist is not the sonata as the dancer *is* the dance—the average concertgoer, as characterized above, tends to say (and be usually correct in saying) not that she heard a performance of Mozart's 39th Symphony but simply that she heard Mozart's 39th Symphony. Full stop. And, furthermore, I argued, this natural, colloquial locution reflects the fact not only that the average concertgoer tends to hear the music, not the performance thereof, but also that it takes some effort, is not easy, to alter one's attention from music to performance.

That having been established, I then went on to point out that in the case of the performer performing *to herself*, it is even more difficult to direct attention away from the work to the performance thereof: away from the music she is playing to *her way of playing it*.

The whole point of the exercise, then, was to show that even where it might seem easy to concentrate on the performance rather than the work, it is a far from easy, nontrivial task. And in self-performance it is, if not impossible, at least exponentially more difficult and less normal than in the usual case, where it is difficult enough.

The groundwork is now laid (finally) for the main purpose of this chapter: a defense of my thesis, in *The Performance of Reading*, that silent novel-reading is a kind of *performance*, in response to one particular objection to that thesis. The groundwork is, actually, more elaborate than the defense. But I hope that will have the payoff of a successful defense. And to that defense I now turn my attention.

READING TO YOURSELF

In my book *The Performance of Reading*, I defended the thesis that in silently reading a novel, I am executing a performance of it to myself. The reason I defended this seemingly counterintuitive thesis was, briefly, as follows.

Nelson Goodman made a distinction that has become well known in the literature between what he called “allographic” and “autographic” arts.[4] Ingeniously, he distinguished between them through the distinction between those arts that could and those that could not be *forged* or *faked*. Thus, it makes sense to speak of forging the *Mona Lisa*, an autographic art work, but makes no sense to speak of forging Beethoven’s *Moonlight Sonata*, an allographic work of art.

Two characteristics of allographic works like plays and music in the classical repertory is that there are “texts,” broadly speaking, and multiple instances of them, thus the many performances of the *Moonlight Sonata* that took place in 2014 and the many performances of *Hamlet* that took place in that year. But as well, there are many copies of the score of the *score* of the *Moonlight Sonata* and many copies of the *text* of *Hamlet*.

Novels, however, present an ontological problem for this neat dichotomy. They are clearly not susceptible to forging or faking. It makes as little sense to speak of a forgery of *Pride and Prejudice* as it does of the *Moonlight Sonata* or of *Hamlet*. Furthermore, like the *Moonlight Sonata* and *Hamlet*, there are multiple texts of the novel. Thus, they seem without question to be allographic arts. What, however, are their "instances"? We don't say that the multiple instances of the *Moonlight Sonata* are the numerous scores of it abroad or the multiple instances of *Hamlet* the numerous texts. But nor can we say, as we can in the case of the *Moonlight Sonata* or *Hamlet*, that its multiple instances are its performances. Because, obviously, *there are none*. I don't go out to a *performance* of *Pride and Prejudice*; I sit home and *read it*. So it seems as if the novel is an anomalous third thing: an allographic art, like notated music, notated dance, and texted drama but whose instances, unlike those others, are its multiple texts.

To resolve this anomaly, a number of philosophers have considered but rejected the idea that the multiple instances of a novel are its multiple readings, which would make them, essentially, performances, the novel therefore a performing art like classical music or texted drama. In my book *The Performance of Reading*, I bit the bullet and plumped for silent readings of novels as performances of them.

Furthermore, in *The Performance of Reading*, I tried to defend the thesis of the book, namely, that silent novel-reading is a kind of performance, and the novel, therefore, at least in an attenuated sense, a performing art, against numerous possible objections. And the objection that troubled me the most, eliciting my most extended, vigorous defense, was that a *performance* is an object in its own right, perhaps even an art object but certainly an object of skill, and therefore an object of attention in its own right. *But*, the objection continues, it is absurd to think that the silent reader of a novel can attend to, pay attention to, her *reading* of the novel, which the thesis of the book claims is a *performance*, as she can concentrate on, pay attention to, the performance of a musical work, in the manner in which I attended to, concentrated upon, the performance of the Mozart Oboe Concerto.

However, as the reader who has gotten this far with me has no doubt observed, I am now taking a different tack in my defense of silent

reading as performance. And it may well be inconsistent with the strategy I employed in *The Performance of Reading*. Thus, I may be, in the event, offering readers a *choice* between two defenses, both of which cannot be held simultaneously, as we shall see in a moment, if the attentive reader has not seen already.

In *The Performance of Reading*, I accepted more or less as an incontestable given the art status of performance and, so to speak, its opacity. In other words, I accepted as a given that in experiencing the performing arts, one is always directly, intently aware of the performance as well as the work: that, in a sense, the performance forces itself upon its audience. And by consequence, clearly, I was obliged to argue that the same must be the case for the performance, as I construed it, of silent novel-reading.[5]

But my strategy here is, however, to deny the given, unquestioned assumption of the opacity of performance and the natural ease with which we attend to it. In doing so, of course, I am attempting to blunt the force of the argument against silent novel-reading as performance, that it is difficult if not impossible for the reader to attend to her reading performance—if that really is what it is—whereas in undisputed instances of performance, like the performance of a symphony, one does so naturally and without effort. Thus, the disanalogy is supposed to be a *reductio* of the thesis that silent novel-reading is a kind of performance.

My strategy here, however, has been to defang the disanalogy. Yes, it is difficult, perhaps difficult in the extreme, to read a novel silently to oneself and at the same time pay attention to, attend to, *how* one is reading it, with what tone and with what expression of the "inner voice." But, I have argued above, it is not so natural, not so easy, to hear the *performance* of the symphony and not merely *the symphony*. And to take it a step closer to silently reading a novel to yourself, it is even less natural, more difficult (say) to play a piano sonata to oneself and at the same time listen to the *performance*—to *how* one is playing the sonata. So why, therefore, should it be surprising that in reading a novel silently to oneself, it is difficult in the extreme to both read and attend to how one is reading?

Over the years since the publication of *The Performance of Reading*, I have from time to time tried to, so to say, "test" my thesis by trying to direct my attention away from *what* I am reading to *how* I am reading it, the same way I might direct my attention from the symphony I am listening to to *how* it is being performed. But somehow, in the former case, something goes awry. As soon as I become conscious, acutely conscious of my reading, it seems to change character. It no longer seems to be the same thing I was doing before.

What seems to me to be happening is some kind of instance of the Heisenberg uncertainty principle, or, that is to say, that part of the principle that holds, as I understand it, that the observation perturbs the thing being observed so that the thing being observed is no longer the thing being observed but something else, produced by the act of observing. For as soon as I concentrate on *how* I am reading, when I am reading silently to myself, it somehow does not seem to be the same inner "voice" that was narrating the novel (for that is how I characterized silent novel-reading in *The Performance of Reading*) but another, "self-conscious voice" that my self-reflection has produced. It seems as if I can't "listen in" on myself: I can't be a self-spy.

But wait a bit! Is the phenomenon I have just described so different from what happens when I, as I described above, fix my attention on the *performance* of the Oboe Concerto? Surely I am not hearing the Oboe Concerto as I was or, rather, as I would have been if I had listened to it as most of the audience did. For when I concentrate on the performance, my listening experience is not the same as when I "just listen." And as in the case of my trying to "listen in" on myself, silently reading to myself, the observation perturbs the observed.

What I have essentially done then in the present chapter is offered a defense of the thesis that silent novel-reading is a kind of performance that is inconsistent with the defense I offered in *The Performance of Reading* against the objection that performances are art objects or, at least, objects of aesthetic contemplation in their own right, and silent readings of novels cannot possibly be *that*: cannot possibly be treated as objects of contemplation in their own right.

Which defense (if either) is the right one? I am not myself sure. But I am reminded here of the lawyer who defends his client against the

charge of murder in the following way: “My client was fifty miles from the scene of the crime when the crime was committed so could not have been the killer. And anyway, *it was self-defense*.” The verdict is in your hands.

NOTES

1. Editor’s note: The original title of the chapter included the subtitle “On Reading as Performance.”
2. For my own view on performance as artwork, argued at length, see Peter Kivy, *Authenticities: Philosophical Reflections on Musical Performance* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1995), *passim*.
3. Arthur C. Danto, *The Transfiguration of the Commonplace: A Philosophy of Art* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1987), 152.
4. See Nelson Goodman, *Languages of Art: An Approach to a Theory of Symbols* (Indianapolis: Bobbs-Merrill, 1968), 112–23.
5. See Peter Kivy, *The Performance of Reading: An Essay in the Philosophy of Literature* (Malden, MA: Blackwell, 2006), 74–87, *et passim*.

Chapter 8

Joking Morality

In the final chapter of his wise and witty book *Jokes: Philosophical Thoughts on Joking Matters*, Ted Cohen addresses, as he puts it, the "widespread conviction, shared by me, that some jokes on some occasions, and maybe some jokes on all occasions, are, as we say, 'in bad taste,' and should be thought of as *morally objectionable*."[1]

I am concerned here exclusively with the claim, which I think is true, that "some jokes . . . are morally objectionable," or, in a word, *immoral*. And in this chapter, I intend to do two things. First, I intend to explain what I think it is we find morally upsetting about some jokes, which is to say, what makes them immoral. Second, I intend to explain how I think we should deal with such immoral jokes.

In pursuing this project, I will, along the way, be considering some of the things Cohen has to say about these matters. And perhaps there will be some implied disagreement emerging as I do so. But by and large, I hope what I have to say will be seen more as amplifications of Cohen's views than as a critique of them.

Now, needless to say, if some jokes can be immoral, they can be immoral, one can reasonably assume, in numerous ways. And I have no intention of trying to enumerate all of those ways, for I have no idea what all of those ways might be. So my first order of business is to narrow down the subject matter to manageable size.

COHEN'S DILEMMA

In his book, Cohen discusses two kinds of jokes: formula jokes, which usually start with a question, such as, "What's an Irishman's idea of a seven-course dinner?," and "the kind of joke that is a very short story—fictional, beginning with a description of people, their things, and their actions, and ending with a very concise conclusion (usually a single sentence) called 'the punch line.'"[2] I will be dealing here exclusively with story jokes, which, for reasons that will become apparent later on, I will usually call "fiction jokes." Here is an example:

> A woman is tending to her grandchild at the beach when an enormous wave takes up the tyke and washes him out to sea. The frantic grandma looks up to heaven and cries in her distress, “Oh God! Please restore my grandson to me.” Hardly have the words left her mouth when another enormous wave deposits her grandchild, unharmed, at her feet. She looks down at him for a moment, gazes up again to heaven, and says, “He had a hat!”[3]

Both Cohen and I agree that some fiction jokes are morally objectionable, or, in a word, immoral. What kind would they be?

Well, as I indicated above, enumerating every kind of joke that might be morally objectionable or disturbing is a task I do not intend to undertake. But one kind of fiction joke that surely is on everyone’s list of candidates for the charge of immorality is the kind of fiction joke that has as its working assumption a derogatory stereotype of a racial, religious, or ethnic group. Such fiction jokes are legion, of course. And they are the ones I will be exclusively concerned with, although what I have to say about them may well be generalizable to other kinds of morally compromised jokes as well.

All of my readers will, of course, be thoroughly familiar with the kind of joke I have in mind here: the kind with the working assumption that all Poles are stupid, or all Irishmen drunkards, or all African Americans oversexed, or all Jews obsessed with money, and so on and so on.

Writing of such jokes, that is to say, jokes assuming disagreeable stereotypes of ethnic, racial, or religious groups, Cohen admits to being amused by some of them and disturbed by some of the same ones he is amused by. And he assures us that he, of course, does not believe the demeaning stereotypes assumed in the jokes. It is clear, furthermore, that the jokes are *morally* disturbing to Cohen, in some sense of the word. And he wonders why. “There are,” he writes, “two questions. First I would like to know just why these jokes disturb me, and then I wonder whether my personal discomfort and objection can be generalized and rendered ‘objective’ so that a negative assessment might be made about the jokes themselves.”[4]

I want now to follow Cohen in his attempt to explain his disturbance with the jokes in question and then go on to offer some suggestions of my own on the nature of immoral fiction jokes and how I think they should be understood and handled.

The most obvious strategy for explaining why one might think a fiction joke with an underlying disagreeable stereotype *immoral* would be a consequentialist one, which is to say, an argument to the effect that the telling of such a joke has a harmful effect. The argument, of course, would be that the telling of a joke (say) turning on the anti-Semitic belief that Jews are all avaricious money-grubbers would have the effect of causing others to believe the stereotype. But, as Cohen quite rightly points out, there is absolutely no evidence that telling such jokes has the deleterious effect claimed. Thus, with regard to a joke based on "the idea that black men are criminals and mindless basketball players," Cohen writes, "As a matter of fact I don't believe the idea, and I don't think that your telling me this joke leads either of us to believe the idea, nor does it suggest that either of us already believes it."[5] Cohen, then, comes to the general conclusion that a consequentialist argument to the immorality of jokes is essentially the only game in town. "Among contemporary normative theories of morality," he writes, "most would require that it be shown that traffic in these jokes produces genuine harm to someone, or at least that it reduces the moral character of those who traffic in them." Furthermore, he finds it "preposterous to suppose that anyone could show that either of these consequences obtains."[6]

But, significantly, Cohen does not, on account of this consequentialist failure, think one should simply back away from one's conviction of a joke's immorality. For he writes, "When it turns out that you can find no convincing evidence to support this claim about the [bad] effects of such jokes you seem obliged to give up your moral complaint. *And you shouldn't do that*."[7]

It appears that Cohen's problem is this. He has the strong feeling that some jokes, especially those that present denigrating ethnic or religious or racial stereotypes, are immoral. But the usual consequentialist arguments fail to establish their supposed immorality.

Yet in spite of this failure to "prove" their immorality, his moral discomfort persists, and he thinks *it should persist*.

In the face of such considerations, it is tempting to concoct some arcane ethical theory that will produce the desired conclusion of such jokes' immorality. But Cohen is suspicious of this move. "When someone demands a moral-theoretical reason for your [moral] condemnation [of a joke], ask them why they think you need one."[8] And again, "don't imagine that your [moral] dislike [of a joke] must be grounded in some stupefying Moral Theory."[9]

It will not have escaped the reader's notice that Cohen has relied exclusively in his moral assessment of jokes on consequentialism. But there are, however, two other prominent moral theories on offer, deontological ethics and virtue ethics, that it would do well for us to consider as possible sources for our moral disturbance with jokes that rely on denigrating racial religious or ethnic stereotypes.

According to the deontologist, there are certain moral rules or precepts that must be adhered to, regardless of the consequences of doing so. Thus, to take two well-known examples, it is wrong to lie or to torture, no matter how beneficial the consequences of doing so or how dire the consequences of not doing so.

Consequentialist intuitions against consistently obeying such moral rules or precepts are as well known as the rules or precepts themselves. Is it really the wrong but not clearly the *right* course of action to lie in order to save a runaway slave from being returned to his master or to save a Jew from being sent to Auschwitz? And is it *really* wrong to torture a terrorist if the consequences of not doing so are the deaths of one thousand innocent victims?

In any case, deontological ethics seems a nonstarter in the present case. To begin with, what would the moral rule or precept be that would make telling or being amused by an immoral joke, made immoral, let it be assumed by its relying on a denigrating Jewish stereotype? Would the rule be, "Never tell a joke with a denigrating Jewish stereotype?" I know of no such moral rule or precept. And to insist, to the contrary notwithstanding, on its being a moral rule or precept seems to be

begging the question in favor of the immorality of such jokes and the telling thereof.

Furthermore, even if it *were* a moral rule or precept, one might very well have the same kind of counterintuition as one has to the precept "Thou shall not lie" when the consequence of disobeying it is the freeing of a slave. By hypothesis, the telling of the joke does no harm. And to refrain from the telling deprives one's company of the pleasure of innocent amusement.

Virtue ethics, though, may have more legs, in present circumstances, and therefore merits more careful consideration. But I will have occasion to discuss it later in the chapter, where it becomes particularly relevant.

Putting aside, then, deontological ethics, what Cohen, it appears to me, has presented us with is a kind of informal paradox or dilemma that can be formulated in this wise. (1) We find some jokes, particularly those that rely upon denigrating racial, religious, or ethnic stereotypes, morally disturbing. (2) The normal, garden-variety argument to support the claim that we are justified in being morally disturbed by such jokes, that, in other words, such jokes are, in fact, immoral, is a consequentialist argument to the effect that such jokes, one way or another, have harmful consequences. (3) But no argument of that kind succeeds: there is no evidence that the morally disturbing jokes in question have any harmful consequences. (4) In such circumstances, it then may lead to one's appealing to some moral theory, to, as Cohen puts it, some "moral-theoretic reason" for morally condemning morally disturbing jokes. But such a move Cohen seems to think is doomed to failure. (5) Yet, even in the absence of a compelling argument of either the garden-variety or moral-theoretic kind, to the conclusion that morally disturbing jokes *are* really immoral, Cohen maintains that we should continue to be morally disturbed. That, it seems to me, amounts to a form of paradox or dilemma. And it is my purpose here to try to resolve it.

JOKES AS ART

My strategy will be as follows. First, I want to claim, quite simply, that fiction jokes are, in effect, miniature works of art. They are, after all, short stories, fictional short stories. To be sure, they are *very* short

stories—but no shorter (and sometimes longer) than some very short poems, which all agree are works of art, their brevity notwithstanding.

It might be objected, however, that works of art typically are authored, composed, painted, sculpted, by known persons or, if not known, assumed, past and present, to whose intentions we ascribe the art-relevant properties of their works. But jokes seem simply to be an authorless, intentionless part of the landscape we call "popular culture," springing up, from who knows where, like mushrooms after a summer rain. And that should surely disqualify them as works of art.

But why so? Is known authorship or, for that matter, single authorship a necessary condition on art? If so, the *Iliad*, *Odyssey*, and all of the folk songs collected by Alan Lomax *et alia* and sung by the great folksingers of my youth would have to be defrocked as well. Is Pete Seeger not a performing artist and his songs not art? A heavy sentence indeed!

Needless to say, I am not claiming for jokes the status of high art. Folk art or popular art will do. And I do not intend to argue the point any further. What I do intend to argue is that when viewed as artworks, jokes can then be judged immoral on the same grounds that, arguably, we judge the immorality of artworks in the high-art tradition. And in so doing, we can, I hope, resolve Cohen's dilemma.

WHO'S TELLING THIS JOKE?

The fiction joke is a genre of performing art. The joke, like a play or a symphony, is a preexisting entity that customarily is executed in a "performance," namely, the *telling*; and joke tellers, like any other performers, vary in style and in ability. That having been said, I will introduce what I have to say here with a joke-telling experience of my own.

I was at table some years ago, being entertained by a group of academics in the customary fashion, after having given a talk in their philosophy department (which need not be named). It is important to note that I had good reason to believe I was the only Jew of the party.

At some point during dinner, I was emboldened to tell a joke. It was a Jewish joke employing the usual stereotype of the Jewish obsession

with money. But it was a rather gentle, good-natured joke with, I think, no harm in it.

What happened next, all too predictably, was that another member of the party, who was not Jewish, himself told a Jewish joke exhibiting the same Jewish stereotype. *And I was offended*! I was offended, let me add, *beyond* the moral disturbance with all such jokes that it is the purpose of the present chapter to try to understand. I was offended by his *telling* that joke.[10]

But where did I get off being offended? I, after all, had started the whole business by telling a Jewish joke myself exhibiting the same well-known stereotype. My dinner companion was simply following suit.

Of course, what lay at the heart of my resentment was the precept, "I may do it. You may not." Why, though, would one endorse that precept in the first place, in the circumstances? Why is it okay for a Jew to tell such a joke but not a Gentile?

Well, of course, if a Jew tells a joke that depends for its effect on a denigrating Jewish stereotype, I can be sure, from the fact that he is Jewish, that he does not believe the stereotype. But if a non-Jew tells it, then I have no such assurance. Needless to say, not all non-Jews believe that stereotype. But when a non-Jew tells the joke, my thought is that he *might* believe it. And that makes him morally suspect in my eyes. It is just the sort of joke an anti-Semite might tell; and, being a non-Jew, the possibility of his anti-Semitic intent is not ruled out.[11] And that is what makes the telling of the joke morally disturbing to me.

Now it might seem here as if we have solved our problem because we have a perfectly good, garden-variety moral reason to be morally disturbed by the telling of the joke with the denigrating Jewish stereotype. We have strong evidence for suspecting that the joke teller, being a Gentile, might be an anti-Semite. And anti-Semitism, needless to say, is a moral defect in character.

But although we have made *some* progress, as I will try to show anon, we have certainly *not* resolved Cohen's (and my) dilemma. And this for two reasons.

First, our moral disturbance with the joke teller will occur only if the joke teller is a non-Jew. But Cohen and I are morally disturbed by jokes

conveying denigrating stereotypes even when we are sure that we and the joke tellers do not believe in the stereotypes concerned and are not, therefore, morally compromised.

And, second, even in cases where we do feel some justified moral repugnance for the joke teller, the problem is that the joke teller is not the object of the moral repugnance we are trying to understand. It is the *joke* that is the object of repugnance, not the joke teller.

We have, however, made some progress with our dilemma, as I suggested above, in concentrating on the *teller* of the joke. The problem is that we are involved in a case of mistaken identity. We have the wrong joke teller.

Let me begin to try to explain this rather mystifying allegation with a reminder to the reader that I am treating jokes as miniature works of fiction: in other words, very short *short stories*. That being the case, we can now avail ourselves of a very useful tool from the literary theorist's kit, namely, the concept of the fictional narrator.

Herman Melville's masterpiece famously begins, "Call me Ishmael." We know right from the get-go that there is a fictional narrator and what his name is. And, of course, he is a major player in the story he tells. On the other hand, *A Tale of Two Cities* famously begins, "It was the best of times, it was the worst of times"—no fictional narrator indicated or named.

But the literary theorists tell us that even when a fictional narrator is neither named, indicated, nor explicitly worked into the story, as Ishmael is in *Moby Dick*, we are to understand that a fictional narrator is "implied" and that, indeed, we can surmise certain traits of his or her character from the way he or she tells the tale and what tale is told.

I shall assume, with the literary theorists, that all works of read literary fiction, by which I mean novels, short stories, and narrative poems, that do not have explicitly specified fictional narrators have implied ones. And given this assumption, let me make the following proposal. If someone were to undertake to read such a literary work aloud, say, to make a recording for the blind, as a theatrical performance, or even in an informal domestic setting, that individual would essentially be taking up the task of an actor or actress, "playing a part," taking on a dramatic role. If he were reading *Moby Dick* aloud, he

would be portraying, playing, the role of Ishmael. And if he were reading *A Tale of Two Cities* aloud, he would be portraying, playing, the role of the implied fictional narrator.

And now, to take the thought to its ultimate conclusion, I suggest that every fiction joke, like *A Tale of Two Cities*, has an implied fictional narrator. Furthermore, the teller of the joke, like the reader aloud of *A Tale of Two Cities*, is playing a part. He or she is portraying, is taking the role of, the joke's implied fictional narrator.

But here's the point. If the joke relies on a derogatory stereotype, then the fictional narrator of the joke has to be assumed to *believe* the stereotype. So, for example, if the joke relies on a derogatory Jewish stereotype, then the fictional narrator is, in a word, an anti-Semite: *that* is fictionally true about the fictional narrator. And it is *he*, the fictional narrator, who morally disturbs us because being anti-Semitic is a moral defect in *his* character, not the character of the person portraying him in telling the joke. Furthermore, that the fiction joke contains, in this case, an anti-Semitic character, namely, the implied fictional narrator, and the implied fictional narrator is *not* presented in the joke with moral disapproval, that is an *artistic* defect in the joke, which is to say, an art-relevant defect of it.

This all, of course, needs spelling out. So let me begin to do so by making clear that I am assuming—but not arguing for here—that if a work of art is morally defective in some respect, then it is artistically defective in that respect. This, needless to say, is a highly contentious claim. Many, however, accept it as a valid claim. And so do I. And there's an end on that.

Of course, having an anti-Semitic character is not, *ipso facto*, a moral defect in a fiction. It all depends on how the character is represented in the fiction. If he is represented in an unfavorable light, then it is not a moral defect. However, as I have suggested above, the implied fictional narrator of a joke does not appear in an unfavorable light and thus does constitute a moral defect in the joke if he is an anti-Semite or a racist or possesses some other moral defect of character.

To this the objection might be made that I have jumped to the conclusion or merely assumed that the fictional narrator of a joke involving a denigrating stereotype believes the stereotype. Perhaps the

fictional narrator is merely alluding to the stereotype, not believing it at all, or is a devious or deceptive narrator, not a simple, straightforward one.[12]

The point, I think, is well taken. It is certainly true that implied fictional narrators come in many varieties: some are straightforwardly honest tellers of a tale, but others may be deceitful, misleading, ironic, satiric, skeptical, and so on. So what right do I have to assume that the implied fictional narrator of a fiction joke is a straightforward, honest, uncomplicated narrator who believes the denigrating stereotype that the joke embodies?

The answer, I think, is not far to seek, however. Quite simply, a fiction joke is just too short and (therefore) too uncomplicated a narrative to provide the kinds of details, convolutions, and cues that can cause us to conclude that the implied fictional narrator is other than completely simple and straightforward. *A Tale of Two Cities* can provide us with such details and cues and convolutions. *War and Peace* can. *Pride and Prejudice* can. But fiction jokes cannot. We do not have enough fictional information in a fiction joke to reveal that the fictional narrator is anything but an uncomplicated believer in the stereotype involved, if there is one involved. Indeed, it is hard to see how such jokes as we are discussing could amuse if the implied narrator were anything but a straightforward believer in the stereotype that is the core of the narrative. So, without evidence to the contrary, we are obliged to take the implied fictional narrator as an honest, uncomplicated one.

But we can now see that we were on the right track in thinking that it is the moral character of the *teller* of the joke that gives the joke its immoral tone. We were just mistaken in which teller is the morally relevant one. It is not the real person telling the joke but rather the fictional person whom the real person is portraying in telling the joke who is the morally relevant one and, therefore, the object of our moral opprobrium.

At this point, I think it is important to distinguish between two things that the joke teller and his listener have in common, according to Cohen, that might lead to a confusion with regard to my explanation of why we find jokes with derogatory stereotypes morally disturbing.[13]

First, the joke teller and his audience must share the knowledge necessary for "getting" the joke. In the case of jokes with derogatory stereotypes, of course, they must share the knowledge that there *are* such stereotypes. But, second, when one person tells a joke to another and the other "gets" it, finds it funny, laughs at it, a sense of community, of commonality, a sense of common humanity between the two is achieved and experienced. As Cohen puts it in one place, "I need reassurance that this something inside me, the something that is tickled by a joke, is indeed something that constitutes an element of my humanity. I discover something of what it is to be a human being by finding this thing in me, and have it echoed in you, another human being."[14]

Now it might be suggested here that what makes jokes with denigrating stereotypes morally disturbing is that the hearer is being "invited," as it were, to join the community of believers in these morally repugnant stereotypes: to share *that* commonality. But we must be careful to distinguish between two things that the joke teller and his listener have in common: the knowledge that is necessary for the listener getting the joke, for laughing at it, and the feeling of common humanity, a commonality, a common human bond, in the fact that the hearer, as the joke teller, finds the joke funny.

The *knowledge* that they share is the knowledge that there exists the particular objectionable stereotype on which the joke relies. But the common humanity they share is evidenced by the fact that they both get the joke, find the joke funny, laugh at the joke. Their common humanity does *not* lie in their believing the objectionable stereotype.

Now, of course, my knowing that there is such and such a denigrating stereotype does not imply that I *believe* the stereotype, and my listener's knowing it does not imply that *he* believes it. But suppose, in the event, I discover that my listener *does* believe the stereotype. That certainly would cause me to dislike and shun the listener. However, it would not destroy the human community that is revealed by us both getting the joke, both thinking it funny, both having a hearty laugh.

Thus, I find no explanation in Cohen's thesis that joke telling and responding give us this sense of community, commonality, of common

humanity, for our feeling of moral disturbance toward jokes with derogatory stereotypes that we nevertheless find funny. And until a better explanation comes down the pike, I will stick with mine. It lies in my moral disapproval of the implied fictional narrator.

But it might here be objected that since every joke with a derogatory racial or religious or ethnic stereotype has, *ipso facto*, so I claim, an artistic defect, namely, the fictional narrator's moral character, every such joke is a bad artwork, thus a bad joke. And that is an unacceptable implication.

However, my view has no such implication. As with any other work of art, a fiction joke may have an artistic defect and still be a good work of art, a good joke, if it has other, meritorious artistic features, the sum total of which outweighs the artistic defect. And, to not put too fine a point on it, if a joke is morally defective in the way under discussion, that moral defect is overridden by the humor of the joke, if the joke is genuinely funny. That, I think, is behind Cohen's quite plausible insistence, with regard to such jokes, to wit: "do not deny that they are funny. That denial is a pretense that will help nothing."[15]

However, this conclusion confronts us with the inevitable question: *Ought* we to laugh at such morally defective jokes as I have discussed above: jokes with morally defective fictional narrators, anti-Semites, racists, and the rest? As Cohen insists, and quite correctly, we can't *literally* say of such a joke, "That's not funny." For, in fact, it *is* funny. But normally, I think, when someone says of such a joke, disapprovingly, "That's not funny," he or she does not mean that literally; rather, he or she is expressing moral disapproval to the effect that "You shouldn't laugh at that joke; you shouldn't find that joke funny." And I want to conclude by considering the validity, or lack of validity thereof, of such moral pronouncements.

LAUGHING MORALITY

Let me cut to the chase. It sounds very odd to tell someone that he *shouldn't* laugh at a joke, in the moral sense of that word, for the simple reason that one can't help laughing at what one finds funny, and, as the venerable moral precept has it, "Ought implies *can*." One can't be

morally culpable for doing what one can't help doing. So one can't be morally culpable for laughing at a morally defective joke that's funny. If I find a joke funny, then, as the saying goes, "I couldn't help laughing."

Perhaps the moralist, as I will call him, may make reply that I am overplaying the independence of laughter from willing. It is, after all, the moralist may insist, sometimes possible to suppress one's laughter. And one is, therefore, at least morally obligated to *try* to suppress one's laughter at morally defective jokes.

But, of course, one only needs to try to suppress one's laughter at a joke when one is amused by it. And if one *is* amused by a morally defective joke, one is already, in the eyes of the moralist, morally compromised. "You shouldn't be amused by such jokes," the moralist will admonish the object of his disapproval. So even if he has succeeded in suppressing his laughter, he has not succeeded in suppressing his amusement and so already stands morally compromised.

Surely now, though, the moralist is making an outrageous demand. For even if the willing suspension of laughter were sometimes possible, the willing suspension of amusement is no more possible than the willing suspension of disbelief. In the moral sense of "ought," one cannot be told one ought not be amused by what, in fact, one finds amusing. "Ought implies can," whether or not it is valid in all circumstances, is valid here.

Of course, in denying doxastic freedom and "amusement freedom," I am not denying one can "take steps" to change a belief and, perhaps, "take steps" to cease to be amused by morally defective jokes. That is to say, although I cannot, by an act of will, immediately start to disbelieve what presently believe, I can seek out evidence and sources of information relevant to that belief in the hope of, eventually, being convinced of its falsity. And, it might be claimed, by parity of reasoning, that although I cannot, by an act of will, immediately stop being amused by what now amuses me, perhaps I can try to seek out whatever relevant considerations there might be that would make me cease to be amused by what now amuses me—morally defective jokes, say, if for some reason I *wanted* to cease to be amused by them.

That being the case, the moralist, although he cannot say to someone, "Stop being amused by that joke," as he can, "Stop beating

that horse," and expect immediate results, he can, at least it would seem, try to get someone to "see things" that might, in the long run, lead to his ceasing to be amused by the joke in question and others like it. But the problem is that it is hard to imagine what the moralist could get the object of his moral disapproval to "see" that would cause him to cease to be amused by the joke. How do you "argue" someone out of amusement? How do you "prove" to someone that what they find funny isn't funny?

If the moralist points out that the joke is immoral in that its implied fictional narrator is a racist, an anti-Semite, or whatever and the joke, therefore, morally and (by consequence) artistically defective in that respect, it will hardly get us to cease being amused by the joke if we are amused by it. For it is that very thing that, in part, makes the joke funny. And that we *are* morally disturbed by the joke is already granted. So we seem to be right back where we started.

I have argued that claiming someone who is amused by good jokes based (say) on derogatory Jewish stereotypes *ought not* be amused by them falls afoul of the well-known moral dictum that *ought implies can*. You can't demand of someone what they cannot do or demand they abstain from that which they cannot help doing.

But I acknowledged, as others have, that there are cases in which *ought implies can* does not obtain. Here is one.[16] A man obsessively fantasizes raping and murdering young women. He never acts out his fantasies. And they do not interfere with his life and work. However, in every idle moment, he incessantly takes pleasure in imagining scenarios in which he rapes and murders young women. Surely we want to say here that even though he can't help having these fantasies, *he ought not* to have them. *Ought*, here, in other words, does not imply *can*. His fantasies are a character defect, a *vice* if you will, which he *ought not* possess as a character trait but can't help having it.

Furthermore, might we not say the same of the man who finds amusing good jokes based on denigrating Jewish stereotypes? Even though he cannot help being amused by them, he *shouldn't* be. Here, once again, *ought* does not imply *can*.

But I think these examples require further scrutiny. Let us compare the following three "oughts." Your doctor tells you that you *ought* to stop smoking. An advocate of animal rights tells you that you *ought* not eat meat. Your friend tells you that you *ought* not indulge in those sexual fantasies of rape and murder.

There is, let me suggest, one striking difference between the first two "oughts" and the third. It is that the first two sensibly can be made into *imperatives* but not the third. Thus, it makes perfect sense for your doctor to say, "Stop smoking!"—obviously a prudential or, Kant would say, a hypothetical imperative. And it makes perfect sense for the animal rights advocate to say to you, "Stop eating meat!"—obviously a moral imperative. But, it appears to me, it makes no sense at all for your friend to say to you, "Stop having those fantasies of rape and murder!" And that is because an imperative assumes (rightly or wrongly) the capability of the person at whom the imperative is directed to *obey* it. By hypothesis, however, the person in the example who indulges in and enjoys fantasies of rape and murder *cannot* obey the imperative since he is meant to be a counterexample to "Ought implies *can*."

What, then, *is* the sense of "ought" in play when we say that the person who indulges in and enjoys fantasies of rape and murder ought not to, for it *does* seem to make sense so to say? It seems to me it is something like this. We are saying that he could be a better person if he did not indulge in and enjoy such fantasies. Or, more grandiosely, if you like, we are saying it would be a better world if he did not do so. For doing so is a character defect—a vice.

But if that is what we are saying, then I do not think we are justified in saying it to the person who is amused by, cannot help being amused by, good jokes that rely on (say) denigrating Jewish stereotypes. For I do not think it is a character defect in him—not a vice. On the contrary, the world is a better place for his being amused and getting a good laugh since innocent amusement and laughter are intrinsic goods. And remember, it *is* innocent amusement and laughter since, by hypothesis, neither the teller of the joke nor the one being amused by it *believes* the stereotype or is led to believe it.

Now, needless to say, it *would* be a better world if denigrating religious, racial, and ethnic stereotypes did *not* exist, even though, by

consequence, we would be denied the jokes based on them and the amusement and laughter they elicited. But we *do* live in a world in which the aforementioned stereotypes, alas, *do* exist. That being the case, it is a better world for the existence of jokes based on them and the innocent amusement and laughter they elicit.

Furthermore, far from encouraging belief in such stereotypes, jokes based on them, to the contrary, *discourage* belief. For what a joke based on such a stereotype does, in effect, is to make the stereotype seem ridiculous since it leads to amusement and laughter. The punch line of such a joke reduces the underlying stereotype to absurdity.[17]

There is, indeed, it is well to point, another kind of "ought" relevant here, what might be called the "ought of taste." Thus, the literary critic might tell you that you ought to improve your taste: that you ought to try to stop enjoying the trashy novels you now consume and cultivate a more refined taste, rather, for the great literary works of the canon. And, likewise, I might try to improve someone's taste in jokes, remonstrating with him that he ought to cultivate a more sophisticated form of humor than he now enjoys. (After all, the jokes I found amusing as a child hardly amuse me now. "What has four wheels and flies? A garbage truck!") But such considerations, interesting though they are, are beyond the purview of the present chapter and so must await a separate hearing.

But, finally, to return to joke morality, can a case be made by the moralist to the effect that being amused by jokes involving denigrating stereotypes constitutes a moral defect in the character of the personage so amused? I don't see how. If the personage who is amused *believes* the denigrating stereotypes, then it is that he believes the stereotypes that is the moral defect in his character, not his disposition to be amused. And if, as we have been assuming throughout this discussion, he does *not* believe the stereotypes, his disposition to be amused is, *a fortiori*, completely free of moral blame.

CONSEQUENTIALISM AGAIN

There is, however, perhaps more to say about the possible causal consequences of telling the kind of jokes under consideration, namely,

those depending upon racial, religious, or other such denigrating stereotypes. There is, Cohen claims, it will be recalled, no evidence that the telling of such jokes has any harmful consequences that might cause us moral disturbance over them. But the objection might be made that we are entertaining here too narrow a conception of harm, *who* is harmed, and *how* who is harmed might *be* harmed.[18] Here is what I have in mind.

Presumably, when one contemplates the harmful consequences of telling such a morally disturbing joke as the kind we are concerned with here might have, one is thinking of the effect the joke will have on someone who hears it told. Thus, if a Jew hears a joke told with an underlying anti-Semitic stereotype, he may very well be hurt, insulted, and that, surely, is a morally harmful consequence of the joke telling. Or a Gentile might hear such jokes told in his family or circle of friends and be caused to become an anti-Semite on hearing enough of them—again, a morally harmful consequence of telling such morally disturbing jokes.

I take it that Cohen is claiming, and I concur, that there is no evidence that the telling of such jokes in such circumstances has such morally harmful effects. But here, now, is a possible rejoinder.

It is an old saying that "What you don't know can't hurt you." But there is an older saying still, by Aristotle, as a matter of fact: "That the fortunes of his descendants and of all those near and dear to him do not affect the happiness of a dead man at all, seems too unfeeling a view and contrary to the prevailing opinions."[19]

In other words, to generalize from Aristotle's contention that the happiness of the dead can be affected by what might possibly happen after their demise to those about whom they cared when alive, "What you don't know *can* hurt you." Thus, for example, so it might be claimed, if I make a slanderous remark to a friend, in private, about someone we both know, but the slandered party never learns of my slanderous remark, nor does anyone else, I still, nevertheless, have done harm to the party I have slandered. What he doesn't know, despite his ignorance of it, hurts him.

Not everyone shares this intuition. But someone who does might well launch the following argument against Cohen's claim that there is

no reason to believe that morally disturbing jokes are morally disturbing in virtue of causing harm since there is no evidence that they *do* cause harm. It will be argued, then, that whenever, for example, a joke with an anti-Semitic stereotype is told, it is a slander against and harms all Jews in the world, even though only those present have heard the telling of the joke. For what they don't know *does* harm them.

Aristotle, by the way, did not think that the dead were *much* affected by the living. For he concludes his discussion of the matter in this wise: "The good as well as the bad fortunes of their friends seem, then, to have some effect upon the dead, but the nature and magnitude of the effect is such as not to make the happy unhappy or to produce any similar changes."[20]

But what about the living? In any event, to begin with, it must be remembered that the *teller* of the joke, by hypothesis, does not himself *believe* the stereotype. So *he* is not slandering Jews. He is merely portraying the implied fictional narrator who is *fictionally* slandering Jews. And, as I have been arguing, it is the implied fictional narrator who is the source of our moral disturbance.

Now I think it were a brave man who would claim evidence to the effect that the portrayed fictional narrator of a genuinely funny joke, of whom it is but fictionally true that he believes the stereotype on which the joke is based, can cause genuine harm to the vast population of those not within hearing of the joke and totally unaware of its telling: "the nature and magnitude of the effect is such as not to make the happy unhappy or to produce any similar changes."

CONCLUDING REMARKS

So it is my conclusion, then, that we are right to be morally disturbed by jokes containing derogatory stereotypes but morally blameless for being amused by them and laughing as a result. And it only remains, now, for me to make an end by way of a brief summary of my argument.

I have attempted, in the present chapter, to resolve what I have been calling *Cohen's dilemma*: a dilemma generated by the concept of the immoral joke. And I want to conclude by briefly reviewing the dilemma as well as my proposed resolution of it.

Briefly, then, here is Cohen's dilemma, as I perceive it. (1) We tend to find some jokes morally upsetting: those with derogatory racial, religious, or ethnic stereotypes, for example. (2) It seems reasonable to argue for their immorality on consequentialist grounds, which is to say, on the grounds of their harmful effect. (3) But there is no evidence that such jokes *do* have any harmful effects, so the consequentialist argument fails. (4) Furthermore, to concoct exotic theories, beyond ordinary moral reasons, to "prove" the immorality of such jokes, Cohen thinks a doomed, fruitless enterprise. (5) Nevertheless, Cohen concludes, we are, in fact, morally upset by such jokes and should continue to be, the absence of moral arguments to the contrary notwithstanding.

That, in the form of five propositions, is what constitutes Cohen's dilemma with immoral jokes.

As I saw the problem, it was that of finding a simple, garden-variety moral argument, other than a consequentialist one, for establishing the immorality of the morally disturbing joke and the explanation, in the process, of why we are morally disturbed. My strategy was, first, to construe fiction jokes, which were the ones I was principally concerned with, as miniature fictional artworks and, second, to construe them, therefore, as having implied fictional narrators.

The idea then was that a joke would be immoral or, shall we say, morally defective, to the extent that the implied fictional narrator displayed an immoral or morally defective character. Thus, to instance a case in point, the implied fictional narrator of a joke driven by a denigrating Jewish stereotype is necessarily taken to *believe* that stereotype, as the teller of the joke, and those listening to the telling are not. The joke *is* immoral in that it contains a morally defective fictional narrator who is not presented in an unfavorable light. But, of course, it may be a "good" joke for all of that if its good-making qualities outweigh its moral (and at the same time artistic) blemish. And that the joke is genuinely funny suffices for that.

Thus, we *should* be morally disturbed by such jokes because they *are* immoral in a very obvious, unproblematic way. But that no more implies that we should not be amused by such jokes than we should cease to enjoy any other artwork that may have a morally objectionable

aspect, just so long as its otherwise commendable aspects outweigh its moral defect.

Let me just add, in conclusion, that what I have been calling *Cohen's dilemma* has depths to it that the present effort has certainly failed to plumb. I have done what at present I can do with it. The rest, for the nonce, is silence.

NOTES

1. Ted Cohen, *Jokes: Philosophical Thoughts on Joking Matters* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1999), 75, emphasis added.
2. Ibid., 1–2.
3. Editor's note: This appears to be Professor Kivy's version of a classic Jewish joke.
4. Cohen, *Jokes*, 78.
5. Ibid., 79.
6. Ibid., 81.
7. Ibid., 82, emphasis added.
8. Ibid.
9. Ibid., 83.
10. I am grateful to Deborah Knight for pressing me on this point.
11. I am omitting here the interesting case of that *rara avis*, the Jewish anti-Semite.
12. I owe this objection to Deborah Knight.
13. I am grateful to Deborah Knight for bringing this problem to my attention and eliciting this response.
14. Cohen, *Jokes*, 31.
15. Ibid., 84.
16. I owe this example and the objection it raises to Michael Slote when I presented an earlier version of the chapter to the philosophy department of Miami University.
17. I think a similar point was being made by another member of my audience at Miami, Mark Rowlands, who communicated to me in an e-mail, among other things, that, as he put it, "the point of its being a joke is that it should not be taken seriously."
18. I am indebted to Larry Temkin for pressing me on this point.

19. Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, trans. Martin Ostwald (Indianapolis: Bobbs-Merrill, 1962), 26–27 (1101a).
20. Ibid., 27 (1101b).

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